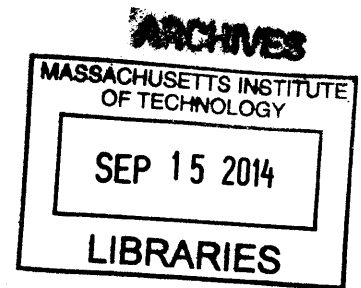


Knock-offs, Fakes, Replicas, and Reals:
A Cultural Supply Chain of Counterfeit Fashion

By

Deja Elana Swartz

B.A. in English
Univeristy of Florida, 2002



SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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**Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies
in partial fulfillment of the degree of
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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
August 2009**

Abstract—

This thesis attempts to uncover the emotional and cultural economics of material culture. What does it mean for material good to be "fake"? What are the salient aspects that are being copied and are those aspects purely material? How does counterfeit branded fashion function as craft, as commodity, and as idea? The first chapter, *Productions*, looks not just at how fakes are made but what makes a fake, at how fake branded luxury goods are produced, both materially and immaterially. The second, *Exchanges*, examines the three most common sites of exchange, street markets, online message boards, and purse parties, and how the culture of exchange at each site produces a value specific to that site. The final chapter, *Ownerships*, explores how owners and observers make meaning from branded luxury goods, real and fake, and how, more specifically, how emerging legal discourses misunderstand the nature of creativity in fashion. To conclude, it considers what it might mean, more holistically, to use branded objects made, bought, and used outside of authorized channels, to constitute everyday life.

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Introduction: Fakes and Reals

"Being copied is the ransom of success" – Coco Chanel

When I was 23, I spent the summer working at the Buffalo Exchange in Houston, TX, one of a medium-sized chain of stores, mostly in the western US, that buys and resells vintage, higher-end, and trendy clothes. Before my stint as an employee, I was a quite regular customer. I kept a somewhat small wardrobe in fairly perpetual circulation at Buffalo. I bought new things close to twice a week, but almost always sold things when I did.

The Houston store, at least in 2004, was a particularly fantastic place to shop. Boutiques in Austin, refusing to mark down their clothes or resell them locally, would bring carloads of overstock and the buyers would usually just knock a zero off. Alice + Olivia pants and Tufi Duek skirts would travel two and half hours, go from \$300 to \$30, get put out on the racks, and go almost immediately into my closet. There was a lot of money in Houston at the time, and, it seemed, no shortage of wealthy women with good taste, poor impulse control and roughly my dress and shoe size. Everyday they'd be there, in a long line at the Buy Counter with the discards from cleaned-out closets, the Neiman Marcus tags still attached. I'd seen Lauren Bush, the then-president's niece and sometimes model, selling clothes there. Once I bought a blouse that, the be-mohawked boy who rung up the

sale informed me, had been sold earlier that day by Solange Knowles, the recently and scandalously pregnant sister of Houston's own R&B star Beyonce. Another time, a friend found a nude Polaroid of someone we'd heard referred to as "the Paris Hilton of Houston" in the inside zip pocket of a purse. We confirmed a positive identification by comparing the shot to a party photo in *PaperCity*, the free society magazine. It was my golden age of personal fashion, and once, at an art opening and looking like I made a lot more money than I did teaching high school, I even had my own likeness appear in *PaperCity*.

I don't even necessarily know if my clothes themselves made me look society-page worthy. The Neiman's and boutique stuff wasn't actually made all that much better than the cheap mall clothes I'd worn before moving to Houston, and they didn't necessarily even look that much different. In fact, a lot of my friends who didn't know or care as much about small designer brands as I did were often unimpressed by Buffalo Exchange, thinking it a little pricey for "used clothes," and preferred to buy similar styles new at Banana Republic or Forever21 for similar prices. But, for me, knowing that the constellation of brands on my body, even if no one else could see them, was unimpeachably awesome made me feel like I wanted my picture taken.

Perhaps for this reason, it was hard to work in the store everyday and not spend most of my paycheck there. I had just resigned my position at the high school after two years and I didn't have another job yet, so I probably should have been more careful with my money. But being an employee there was hard work. Everyday, they buy, display and sell hundreds of pieces of merchandise¹. It can get very busy. The socialites and the B-list

¹ Buffalo Exchange is not run as a consignment system where sellers bring in their things, set a price with the store, and receive a percentage of the money when and if an item is sold, but as a buy-sell-trade. People bring in their stuff and meet with a buyer, who decides quickly whether or not to take each item and how much to price it for.

celebrities and those jockeying for first bids on their clothes got crabby when the store was crowded. By the end of the day, I never quite felt working there was worth it unless I could take full advantage of my employee discount.

One day, during a slow morning, an older woman came in and wandered around the store, not touching anything. She wore no makeup on her round, rough face. She had limp salt-and-pepper hair in a short bob, navy polyester elastic waist slacks, and a plain top. She carried no handbag, just an old plastic bag, which she held like an evening clutch. She was very plain, except for a very ornate vintage hat. It was garnet velvet with a little veil and had emerald birds nesting in it. Extreme eccentrics, I should mention, wealthy or otherwise, are also very Houston.

She came up to the Buy Counter, where I was working. "My friends tell me that it is time to sell things. I often think that I should," she said. Her affect was very flat.

"Oh really? Well, I'm the buyer on today. You can bring things in at anytime." She didn't appear to have anything with her to sell, but I as usual, lacked the cool kid bad attitude that most of my fellow Buffalo buyers usually wore to work.

She placed the plastic bag down on the counter and slowly uncoiled the twine that I now noticed was wrapped around it. She unfolded the bag, which was much larger than it looked, and removed from it a classic Chanel purse-- black quilted canvas, gold chain strap, and interlocking C logo at the clasp of the fold-over flap. It looked older but barely used.

Buyers only take what they think the store can sell in a month and price it accordingly. Sellers then receive either 30% in cash or 50% in store credit immediately. Whatever the buyer decides not to take is returned to the seller, who can choose to drop it in the donation bin, which builds to a mountain and is picked up by a charity multiple times each day. All employees are trained as buyers and all spend a part of their day working at the Buy Counter.

Just a few days before, on a busy weekend afternoon, a college-aged girl had come in with a much newer Chanel bag. It too was in excellent shape, had been leather, larger, and still had the protective storage bag. A crowd had gathered as my manager, herself a lover of all things Chanel, had priced it. "I'm sorry, this is just gorgeous and I know you probably spent a ton on it, but I probably can't go above \$100. That's just the best I can do." The seller, who looked miserable to be giving it up, winced and said it was brand new, that she's never used it, and that her parents had spent at least \$700 on it. The manager seemed to be experiencing empathy pains with the girl, asking the other employees what they thought a good price was, and even tried talking the girl out of selling it since she didn't think she could offer her a truly fair price. Eventually they agreed on \$115.

"They say that I should sell it, and they are often correct." The woman before me now said in a monotone, "I believe that sometimes there is a time for things to happen. There are signs of the right thing to do and they are often the ones who must alert me to the signs."

I was nervous, both because the odd countenance of the woman and because I'd never priced anything like a Chanel bag before. The possibility that she was mentally ill made me anxious about taking advantage of her, especially because I knew how badly I wanted that bag.

I picked it up and opened it. The inside was lined with rich burgundy leather and stitched with a larger Chanel logo. There was a matching coin purse and a mirror that fit into one of the inside pockets. I waived a manager, who was not nearly as interested in designers as the other one, and asked her what she thought. She just shrugged, "I dunno. A hundred?"

"The other day Frannie bought that new one for \$115," I gestured toward the glass case, where it still sat, thinking that the price would go up.

"I guess \$90 then? This one is a lot older and not leather." I stared at her. "\$95? You decide."

"Okay," I told the woman, "We can buy this for \$100. That means that we can give you \$50 in cash or \$35 in store credit."

"There are times when it is certain what must be done," she said.

There was a rule at Buffalo Exchange about not pricing anything that you yourself want to buy, so I was nervous about asking the manager if I could set it aside for myself, but she was as apathetic as before, and it was mine and, with my employee discount, only cost \$65.

Soon enough, I got a job in development at a counseling center and got to carry the bag to lots of fancy fundraisers as well as to the bars and parties I frequented off-duty. People would come up to me all the time and compliment it. Sometimes I could tell that they were trying to figure out if it was real, which seemed silly to me, since it was clearly vintage and, I assumed, counterfeiting was a new thing. I had other fake things, but I liked being the kind of person who carried both real and fake interchangeably. Sometimes I said it had been my grandmother's, sometimes I told the real story. I always showed off the beautiful inside stitching and the cute little accessories and mentioned how not even Chanel makes 'em like that anymore.

Eventually, I moved with my then-boyfriend to Virginia, where no one seemed to care about my Chanel bag and there was no Buffalo Exchange, only the mall and boutiques I couldn't afford with merchandise that was more boring than it had been in Texas, anyway. I

was particularly excited, then, when my boyfriend, a sculptor, was selected by his gallery to show at Art Basel Miami. I'd heard about the great art and the glamorous parties at the art fairs, and I knew that they represented exactly what was missing from my life in Richmond. But the art fairs are all about the wrist band, and though my boyfriend had a special one indicating that he was a featured artist, the gallery didn't even have a lower tier one for me. We usually figured out a way to get me in, but I was sick of making the case for myself, of trying to prove that, like my boyfriend and his friends, I was a Very Important Person.

On the second night we were there, I got separated from the group, didn't know where the party was, and was sitting alone by some hotel pool, clutching my Chanel bag and feeling stupidly sorry for myself, on the phone, leaving a message on my boyfriend's voicemail, trying to find where the hell everyone was. Out of nowhere, a tall, beautiful tan woman appeared and, without saying anything, eyes glassy and blissful, took an all-access band off her wrist and slipped it on to mine, then drifted away before I could even close my flip phone.

I wandered until I found a cluster of similarly wrist-banded people and, branding my own wrist and my Chanel bag, asked them where the best party was. They pointed me in the direction of the Delano, where they said there was a great *Vanity Fair* party happening. I soon walked right past some well-dressed men who were trying unsuccessfully to get by security and into the party. I drifted about, trying to find some conversation to join.

"That is not Chanel," a drunken European man in a white suit said loudly as I half turned away.

"Excuse me?" I said.

The man in the white suit stared at me, stared at my bag, and then looked away, refusing to say another word.

“He is so cruel,” a blonde woman sitting next to him slurred. “So cruel.”

“This was my grandmother’s,” I lied. “It is from 1967,” I made up, “and it is most certainly not a fake,” I declared, even though I’d worn fake Versace flip-flops earlier that day.

The woman just shrugged, and the man continued to not speak to me, not even to look at me.

I was more confused than angry or insulted. I mean, here I was, with the wristband, at the *Vanity Fair* party, looking, I thought, every bit the artist’s girlfriend. Plus the bag was really well made, and vintage! It was true that I sometimes wondered if my Versace flip-flops, which were gaudy and fun and looked pretty obviously fake, were offensive to people, but, especially when I thought about gaudy, fun, fake Donatella Versace, I kind of liked them for that reason. But this Chanel bag—it *was* real!

The pronouncement that my bag was inauthentic, as ridiculous as it seemed, bothered me. When I got home, I looked carefully at it. There was just no way. I had only seen midrange and low-end fakes at that point, and to my knowledge, this just seemed too good! But I googled it, and I couldn’t find a Chanel bag from any year in the exact right model. And when I looked a little bit closer at the mirror, the logo looked a little bit off. No, I thought, this is older, from before the whole logo thing was such a big deal, and maybe things were slightly less standardized? And most importantly, that woman—that dowdy crazy woman in the hat-- here was no way she’d have a fake. I mean, it just didn’t seem like she’d know how to get it.

And then I thought, there was no reason for him to question my beautiful talismanic bag, and certainly not so publicly. It seemed like something he should have whispered, or said in snottily to his friend in a language he knew I couldn't understand. I was shocked. I didn't get it. The more I thought about it, the more his behavior seemed off, and I began to think that maybe I wasn't the only one at the party who was, or who felt like, an inauthentic VIP.

That's when I began to feel, well, somewhat guilty. I had used the bag like the wristband, or like my Texas socialite act, to gain entrance to places, to exert power in the world. I had instrumentalized them, and I had allowed their effectiveness as tools to define the value I drew from them, to define whether or not they were authentic. Perhaps unfairly, I blamed the man in the white suit for *infecting* me with what I then decided was his problem, not mine, for making me forget that there was a lot more to me and my experience with my bag than whether or not he thought, correctly or incorrectly, it was Chanel. At the same time, I knew that my wristband and my Houston accent and my bag were real, even more so, perhaps, because they were uniquely acquired.

This thesis attempts to uncover the emotional and symbolic economies of material culture. What does it mean for a material good to be "fake"? What are the salient aspects that are being copied and are those aspects purely material? How does counterfeit branded fashion function as craft, as commodity, and as idea? What does it mean to consume luxury branded fashion outside the channels authorized as branded or luxury?

As much as possible, I have tried to acknowledge my own stakes in this project, the enjoyment I take in fashion, branded or not, fake or real, as well as the ambiguously moral indignant reaction I've always had when I hear people knock knock-offs. As Jenkins,

McPherson, and Shattuc remind us, “the popular is political and sometimes pleasurable” (2002:23). I have endeavored to make my own politics and pleasure part of this work. Further toward this end, I have been theoretically promiscuous, finding relevant literature in anthropology, cultural studies, jurisprudence, and marketing. At times I have felt unmoored, as though this interdisciplinary mishmash gave me breadth but not depth of insight. If nothing else, I think that this has made me even more aware of the importance of and increased my interest in pursuing academic practices that can engage with deeply interdisciplinary interests.

I endeavored to take an “ethnographic stance” and attempted to locate most of my own understanding by trying to understand culture through observing the practices and taking seriously the insights of other people. At the same time, I understand that the scope of my fieldwork is far from sufficient to be called truly ethnographic. Nevertheless, I have tried to have an ethnographic imagination, with the primary purpose, as Clifford Geertz famously put it, of “thick description” (1973:6). To manage the scope of my report, I chose to create illustrative composites to describe individuals and situations I encountered. Nevertheless, *getting it right* was the highest ethical standard against which my writing could be tested, and though identifying salient details were compressed and altered, I tried very hard to be qualitatively and rigorously honest.

I employed what I believe to be standard ethnographic interviewing methods, drawing especially from McCracken’s *The Long Interview*, which provides practical provocations and a framework for working within one’s own culture, emphasizing a “rummaging process” through which the researcher uses the “self as instrument” (1988:18) to mine his or her own experiences as a member of the culture, while at the same time

pushing for “manufactured distance” (1988:22) in order to attain a degree of objective distance. In practice, I deviated from McCracken’s suggested format because, although I initially constructed an open-ended questionnaire to use as an analytic tool, I found it more effective in most cases to adopt a less “high-efficient, productive, ‘stream-lined’ instrument of inquiry” (1988:7), especially when I accompanied group of interlocutors on shopping trips or spent time with them doing what I’ve heard referred to in the marketing research industry as “closet archaeologies.” Although I referred often to the questionnaire, and found it a very useful exercise for reviewing and uncovering cultural and analytic categories, I vacillated flexibly between it and a more unstructured practice.

My work here also looks at message boards, blogs, and other online sites, where text, mostly in the form of posts, comments, and other messages within topically dedicated communities, becomes not just language to be analyzed textually but also action to be interpreted culturally, highlighting the interplay between these two critical traditions. Towards that end, I have used Robert Kozinet’s work on “netnography,” which is particularly useful in that it was specifically developed with “online communities devoted to consumption-related topics” (2002:70) in mind. In addition to observing the online communities I was interested in, I also made contact with key members and engaged in conversations with them via Private Message, both to gain new insights and for clarification about what was going on in the public forum.

George Marcus’s “multi-sited ethnography” has been extremely influential in the way I conceived of my research project, which seemed from the outset too peripatetic to situate through one site. Through Marcus, I began to try to understand the relationship of the local to global social worlds in which fakes are imagined, produced, bought, used, and

owned, trying to understand counterfeit branded fashion as a phenomenon that exists both “in and of the world system” (1995:95). Heeding his injunction to “follow the thing” (1995:106), I decided to shape my study as a “supply chain,” following the flow of fakes from production to exchange and into the hands of the user. This approach is also akin to Igor Kopytoff’s “cultural biography of things,” in which one uncovers how societies “construct objects as they construct people” (1986:90) to look at objects as “culturally constructed entities, endowed with certain culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (1986:68).

Thus, I have decided to call my approach a “cultural supply chain” of counterfeit fashion. Unlike a more literal ethnography of a supply chain as a process in the world system, I did not conduct field research at production sites, tracing the condition surrounding material inputs. However, my actual research practice remained mobile, occurring in street markets, homes, online, and through coffee shop interviews, sometimes with individuals and sometimes with snowball-sampled social networks. In some cases, I found the people first and earned entry into sites of exchange and communities of practice through them. In some cases, I went to the site of exchange and found the people and the groups therein. What kind of production practices did those I speak with imagine? How did they conceive of the kinds of exchanges and uses they were involved in? At times, I followed threads picked up in interviews to analyze industry practices and legal discourse. The supply chain model provided three entry points, three opportunities to ask the same questions, three lenses through which to begin to look for answers.

The first chapter, *Productions*, looks not just at how fakes are made but what makes a fake, at how fake branded luxury goods are produced, both materially and immaterially.

The second, *Exchanges*, examines the three most common sites of exchange, street markets, online message boards, and purse parties, and how the culture of exchange at each site produces a value specific to that site. The final chapter, *Ownerships*, explores how owners and observers make meaning from branded luxury goods, real and fake, and how, more specifically, emerging legal discourses misunderstand the nature of creativity in fashion. To conclude, I consider what it might mean, more holistically, to use branded objects made, bought, and used outside of authorized channels, to constitute everyday life.

Chapter One: Productions

“Mass marketing requires mass banality.” –Miuccia Prada

Making the Real Fake

The first time I became aware that there was such a thing as fake fashion, I was in middle school and my friend Shelly went to New York City on vacation. In Chinatown, she said, you could pick out a bag from a variety of styles, colors, and fabrics, and then the seller would affix the brand logo of your choice onto it. It was early-1990s, and high-end luxury brands were not yet on my radar. I knew vaguely of Armani and Versace and Calvin Klein, but they seemed to belong to the world of adults. But, I lived in another equally elaborate ecosystem of clothing brands, so I understood their power to confer a certain status or distinction; I was immediately fascinated by Shelly's story.

In my world, clothes from 5/7/9, a mall shop named for the most common range of junior sizes, were essential. My friends and I jokingly (and revealingly) called it 0/3/5 - the size range that was actually most commonly worn by girls in our crowd. Though we may have been slyly and cruelly celebrating our relative thinness, the truth was that those smallest juniors' sizes corresponded well with the largest girls' sizes, and the world of girls' apparel was exactly what we hoped 5/7/9 would help us escape. Shopping there implied

that you wandered freely through the brightly-lit, pop-music playing, freestanding mall stores, that you were not tethered inside the JC Penney's dressing room, your mother sticking her two fingers into the waistband of a pair of pants, scrutinizing how long it would be before you grew out of them. A little skirt from 5/7/9 was a magical talisman to protect against the "awkward stage."

But 5/7/9 clothes were not clearly labeled, nor were they *that* distinguishable from clothes from other, less cool stores, or even some found in the girls' department. It was important, then, to carry your lunch or return clothes borrowed from a friend at a sleepover in a 5/7/9 shopping bag, thus building the reputation of one who shopped there regularly, even if you didn't really, or not as much as you'd like people to believe. These conspicuously branded bags were saved and collected, for they conferred—more so than the sassiest dress you could buy there—the precious and elusive ideal of attractive teenagerness onto whatever they contained, and whomever carried them.

Talking with Shelly about her NYC trip, I recalled being in sixth grade and on the brink of brand savvy but not quite well-mannered in it, and asking my friend MacKenzie if she would hand her outgrown Gap jeans down to me. The Gap, also an important brand, was less evocative of nubile femininity. Boys and adults shopped there, too. A Gap label on a denim jacket didn't necessarily make you cool, but it kept you beyond reproach. I knew MacKenzie's jeans wouldn't fit—she was built on a dramatically larger scale than I was, due to our different rates and stages of growth—but I had an exciting idea: I'd rip out the Gap label and sew it onto the back of my own, irrelevantly branded jeans.

I couldn't believe no one had ever thought of something so intelligent before. There was nothing special, really, about Gap jeans. My jeans could *so easily* be transmuted. I had

two pairs of jeans from the Gap, and they were among my prized possessions, and MacKenzie just seemed to have so many, as if there was nothing special about them at all. Perhaps for this reason, she looked at me like I was crazy when I explained my ingenious scheme, then just sort of shrugged it off. Thank you, gods of adolescence, I think now, that we were not deeper into middle school when I proposed this to her, or else MacKenzie might not have been so mercifully clueless.

So, when Shelly told this fairytale of this place and this process through which anyone could have any brand they wanted attached to whatever item they wanted, it resonated so deeply within me that I felt like the world was finally coming into alignment with the way I'd long understood it. The moment I got home, I excitedly told my mother about what I'd heard.

"That is completely ridiculous," she responded. "Why would you take a perfectly good bag—I mean, if you like the style and it's decent quality—and turn it into a tacky fake?"

I have been trying to understand what this response meant ever since. What does it mean for something—indeed, something with physical properties—to be fake? How can one transform a "perfectly good bag" into a "tacky fake" just by adding a logo to it? How is it that this act simultaneously increased and decreased its value? So, although the discussions that follow will take into consideration how fake things are made, I am particularly interested in what makes them fake.

In this chapter, I want to explore how, and also to argue that, a thing that is culturally rendered "fake" can draw from the same well of meaning as that which is rendered "real," while simultaneously possessing meaning and value in its own right as a

fake and then, by unpacking a variety of clustered cases, figure out why some things are made fakes while others are made real. The realness or fakeness of an object can be variously determined at many levels—legal, social, and economic—but is not primarily a matter of the conditions surrounding the actual physical construction of the object, nor is it primarily contained anywhere in the physicality of that object itself. Instead, how a fake is made—what makes it a fake—is in play, contested. When dealing in terms of authenticity, then, we must not simply ask whether a thing is authentic, but what contextual meaning of authenticity of being deployed and, ultimately, to whom.

Even the Real can be Fake

The unauthorized act of “slapping a logo on something,” as one regular consumer of high-end replicas disparagingly put it, and as my mother implied of the handbags Shelly saw in New York City, transforms it from a real thing (a bag) to a fake thing (a fake, say, Prada Bag). What exactly IS a brand, then, and why would someone want to “slap” it on something else? How can a backpack made of cheap, thin black nylon with a dinky metal Prada logo slapped on the front have any value?

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to consider how a real backpack made of equally cheap, thin black nylon with a slightly less dinky metal Prada logo slapped on the front gains *its* value. We are accustomed to thinking of luxury fashion as deriving its worth from craftsmanship and premium quality materials. In *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster*, a popular nonfiction “history of the end of luxury,” Dana Thomas (2007) makes a clear distinction between “luxury” and “luxury branded items.” For her, “luxury” is, as she says

again and again, “the dream.” It is an elusive concept, one that she really only defines anecdotally by quoting *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland musing about how “very few people had ever breathed the pantry air of a house of a woman who wore the kind of dress *Vogue* used to show when I was young” (2007:7) or about how, once long ago, one could assume that “the suitcase or handbag covered in the intertwining LV logo implied that its carrier appreciates the fine-quality craftsmanship, has the money to afford it, and travels in the same circles as other Louis Vuitton customers— in first class” (2007:18).

For Thomas, luxury also seems to relate to the humility of the craftsman. For her, they must be “humble artisans” who are happy with their role in serving aristocracy and proud of their work. Thomas quotes Christian Dior’s 1957 *Time Magazine* article in which he explains, “We inherited a tradition of craftsmanship rooted in the anonymous artisans.” He likens himself to skilled workers like automobile mechanics and plumbers saying, “They feel humiliated if they’ve done a shoddy job. Similarly, my tailors and seamstresses constantly strive for perfection” (2007:8). They are not motivated–tainted–by the market. They are living out a vocation, a calling.

The luxury industry, in Thomas’s narrative, began with small, family-owned groups of such artisans. Over generations, they honed their craft and developed processes to construct intricate, special items for those who could afford it. She writes with seeming nostalgia about the days when “rulers passed sumptuary laws, thus preventing commoners from imitating nobles and reining in conspicuous consumption” and “faking luxury was the ultimate disgrace” (2007:6). So, too, is she reverent of the time-period-collapsing “reign of the Bourbons and Bonapartes in France,” when many of today’s luxury brands emerged. Louis Vuitton, Hermès, and Cartier were founded in the similarly specificity-defying

“eighteenth or nineteenth century” by “humble artisans who created the most beautiful wares imaginable for the royal court” and then went on to provide the same “natural and expected element of upper-class life” for an “extremely limited and truly elite clientele” (2007:7) well into the twentieth century. Luxury, in its “golden age” during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, was threatened by WWII’s rationing as well as the Nazi occupation of Paris, re-emerging with Dior’s post-war “New Look,” and then “went out of style” because of the “youthquake” of the 1960s.

For Thomas, luxury was destroyed. It was not until the 1980s and the rise of the “unmarried female executive,” with her disposable income, that luxury began to be relevant again, though as Thomas sees it, it was not “the dream” that rose out of the ashes, but something different: the “luxury brand industry.” Corporate tycoons began to “take over” luxury companies from “elderly founders” and then “turned their sights on the middle market” hoping to sell the “luxury dream” to everyone from “teachers and sales executives to high-tech entrepreneurs, McMansion suburbanites, the ghetto fabulous, even the criminally wealthy” (2007:9). Although, as Thomas explains, the idea was to “democratize” luxury and make it “accessible,” the tycoon’s motives were anything but “noble.” “Heck,” she writes of democratization, “it almost sounded communist. But it wasn’t. It was as capitalist as could be: the goal, plain and simple, was to make as much money as heavenly possible” (2007:9).

In their quest to destroy luxury and make money, these tycoons “launched a two-pronged attack”— the first level of which was to “hype their brands mercilessly” both by “trumpeting the brand’s historical legacy and the tradition of handmade craftsmanship to give the brands the air of luxury legitimacy,” and by staging extravagant and shocking ad

campaigns and fashion shows, complete with celebrity endorsements (2007:9). The second level was to make their brands more “approachable” and “accessible” by mass producing items and opening more boutiques, online shops, and even discount outlets. To “further pump their numbers,” they also began manufacturing “cheaply made”—industrially produced with cheap materials by deskilled labor-- and “logo-covered” accessories, along with perfume and cosmetics. As a result, anyone who could “drop \$25 on a tube of lipstick” could “delude” him or herself into believing that s/he could own a “piece of the luxury dream” (2007:11).

In Thomas’s history, “luxury” itself degraded into the “luxury good *industry*.” (emphasis mine). Although Thomas ostensibly decries the loss of skilled labor and quality of design and construction, it seems that she is actually describing a loss of a particular “dream,” a holistic imaginary lifestyle, one with the ability to alchemize the gaudy into the exquisite, the ordinary into the elegant, consumption into passion, and labor into love. “People don’t believe there is a difference between real and fake anymore,” Thomas writes. “Consumers don’t buy luxury branded items for what they are but for what they represent [...] and good fakes—the kind that can pass for real—now represent socially the same thing as real,” she writes (2007:280).

Indeed, when the actual “real” object is somewhat boring, and on top of that, cheaply made, what else is left? As an indignant Chinatown shopper told me of their earlier sightseeing slightly uptown in the designer boutiques of SoHo, “When the real stuff is this shitty, you’re really just paying for the brand. I love Fendi, but I don’t feel like I have to pay those kinds of prices when it’s all made in the same factory probably.” It did not matter to her that the fake—or the real it simulated—was not a high-quality “luxury” item, as

Thomas would define it. Instead, what she was buying, what she wanted to buy, *was* the brand. This shift need not be one of decline. Indeed, it may simply represent a change from fashion as material to semiotic good, the manufacturing of cultural capital for its own sake.

Fashion as Transmedia

Today's branded objects are no less endowed with creative meaning, but that meaning and need not be tied to its the material properties. Like the 5/9/7 bags of my childhood, the brand itself —whether represented by a logo affixed to a real or fake item— can have meaning that transcends materiality.

One useful way to describe how that meaning is produced is to think of it as “transmedia,” a term Henry Jenkins has used to describe an emerging popular form based on “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (2007). His classic example is that of The Matrix franchise, which spreads its story across three films and several animated shorts, comic book series, and video games. Currently most transmedia franchises consist of a primary property, a television show or feature film, usually, with linked sub-extensions in other media. But, it follows from the decentralized logic of the form that there need not be a primary property, that the information can be distributed more evenly across platforms.

Although it may seem to be a significant leap from The Matrix to Marc Jacobs, the idea of meaning in fashion being made transmedia is useful because it describes how a disaggregated network of information can produce a coherent larger story with flexible boundaries. In addition, transmedia properties similarly give insight into the way meaning in fashion is produced because both occur via collective intelligence, both the work of a

wide variety of creative professionals and that of fans who act as collectors of information across media *and* as producers of their own highly important inputs.

Much of the interest in transmedia storytelling focuses on narrative and rhetorical structure-- the mechanics and poetics of distributed storytelling processes, but transmediation is not limited to fictional entertainment properties. Elsewhere, Jenkins refers to “transmedia navigation,” which expands the idea to include following the flow of both stories and information across multiple modalities, and so although the meaning of fashion brands may not always blend into a cohesive narrative the way *The Matrix* does, the logics of transmedia storytelling inform the ways in which structures of aesthetic meaning and value are produced (2006: 46).

Prada’s 2008 Trembled Blossoms project is clearly evocative of such transmedia processes. It represents the efforts of a variety of well-known creative workers, including a filmmaker, a composer, and multiple visual artists, to produce paintings, in-store installations, and a series of animated short films, which were displayed both at Prada events and distributed online. The installations, along with more standard print advertising and the actual clothes, created—if not a story, then certainly a cohesive aesthetic experience. Similarly, other fashion designers like Rachel Nasvik have experimented with Alternate Reality Games, which use the real world as a platform for interactive gameplay by distributing information and clues across variety of sites using the internet and mobile technology, that even more overtly borrow from the transmedia storytelling trend.

Beyond these examples, branded fashion almost always happens transmedia. Part of the meaning and value of any given branded objects relies on symbolic information drawn from a variety of sources, well beyond traditional advertising and branding mechanisms,

perhaps starting with the image of the designer. A Chanel bag, then, becomes an amalgam of Coco Chanel, famous as much for her glamorous personal life and snarky bon-mots as for her contribution to design, and current head designer and artistic director Karl Lagerfeld, styled as an eccentric, temperamental genius who rips the pages from books after reading them and is trailed at all times by an assistant carrying a goblet of Diet Coke. The role of the designer is not simply to produce each season's collection (today, that aspect is typically handled by a large staff of assistant designers) but to serve as an embodied figurehead for the transmedia brand.

The architecture and emplacement of the retail stores is similarly important: Prada's New York City flagship store was designed by architect Rem Koolhaas; Louis Vuitton stores have featured installations by artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Dan Flavin. Similarly, the elaborate multimedia spectacle of a fashion show serves not only to display a collection, but also to resonate with and reinforce its transmedia story. The transmedia brand meaning is the result of the collective labor of hundreds of creative professionals. Although, as Howard Becker points out, creative work has always depended on countless recognized and unrecognized inputs, transmedia production overtly embraces collective creative intelligence to the extent that it endeavors to exploit the unique affordances of each media and, hence, the contributions of "laborers" in each realm (1984:2). Even the inexpensive cosmetic products and mass production processes that Thomas decries becomes part of the transmedia story of quality and craftsmanship.

Transmedia entertainment properties, according to Jenkins, offer different points of entry for different kinds of consumers. Jenkins gives the example of Marvel's *Mary Jane Loves Spiderman* comics, which were designed to draw in female readers to the world of

Spiderman. Similarly, Marc by Marc Jacobs, a lower-priced dispersion line, includes items like flip-flops, which sell for as a little as \$15. These inexpensive items contain the same sense of irreverent humor and, in many ways, much of the same meaning as the Marc Jacobs couture collection. A \$30 Marc by Marc Jacobs tote bag (that I, incidentally, own), for example, is printed in large letters with the following:

Jacobs
by
Marc Jacobs
for
Marc by Marc Jacobs
in collaboration with
Marc Jacobs for Marc by Marc Jacobs

This resonates with higher end handbags which are similarly playful with the very idea of authenticity, such as those from the 2008 Bag on Bag series, which typically cost upwards of \$2,000 and appear to be a large plastic tote bag containing a smaller Stam handbag, one of the most popular (and often counterfeited) recent items from the line. Further, this playfulness, even sarcasm, is apparent in print advertising that, though displaying neither bag, speaks to both, such as those featuring former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham inside a giant plastic Marc Jacobs shopping bag, only her legs (and Marc Jacobs platform heels) visible, clumsily sprawled out, as if exhausted from a long day of shopping. Although items in the Bag on Bag collection are made in more limited quantities, both the \$30 and the \$2,000 totes are available at the same retail outlets, of which there are only 10 in the United States.

Even if value is not made by limited quantity and prohibitively exclusive pricing, distribution sites are limited, and authenticity and value is produced in relation to these specific locations. The shop in Provincetown, a village located on the extreme tip of Cape

Cod Massachusetts known as a vacation spot particularly friendly to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered communities, for example, sells beach bags that display, in addition to the standard Marc Jacobs branding/authenticity-related humor, references AIDS/HIV awareness and marriage equality, a portion of the sale of these items supporting these causes. Thus, a cheap beach bag becomes not just an authentically cool, socially-aware, and irreverent Marc Jacobs item, it is also an authentic Provincetown souvenir.

Unauthorized branded fashion of all kinds draw from the same transmedia well of meaning as the authorized versions, and sometimes with greater success. But, because they are fake, they are simultaneously overlaid with an additional layer of meaning. A hilariously bad fake has a value that all its own that ricochets off the meaning of the original. A perfectly crafted fake-- one that replicates in precise detail an authorized object, one that might just be made at the same location or perhaps by a craftsperson of equal skills level-- is valuable because of this quality of construction and verisimilitude, but also, as a perfect fake, it is a rarer and more exclusive object than the original. Thus, real and fake can be simultaneously the same thing, drawing from the same transmedia logic of meaning, and, because there is always this extra layer, different things.

Thomas's characterization of the shift from tangible craftsmanship to marketing misses a significant distinction between the transmediation of entertainment and that of fashion. As Jenkins points out, transmedia entertainment properties reflect the economic model of media consolidation and horizontal integration, whereas transmediation in fashion has an economic logic: it is also not purely what we think of as "branding"-- a set of communication designed to sell a product. Instead, like a transmedia story where the sum of all parts converge to make a full narrative, the meaning and value of branded fashion

resides not in any particular component but in the overarching structure, in the network. Even a simple logo item—real or not—contains the sum total of these creative expressions. Meaning produced transmedia is poured into all items associated with the brand. Every part contains the whole.

Because brand meaning is not located in any particular site, it must be portable, must be allowed to exist in a variety of sites, authorized and unauthorized. This is why the Hermes logo tattooed on the hip of one of my interviewees could stand for the principles of uncompromising craftsmanship, family business values, and timeless design. Like the Hermes trademark it replicated, the tattoo signified all of this meaning to the person upon whose body it was permanently drawn. The fact that the trademark image was not impressed into a \$20,000 Birkin bag by an employee of Hermes, but rather was inked onto a person's own skin by a tattoo artist in Brooklyn, did not diminish its meaning. "Authenticity" is not compromised as it is impossible to locate in any one particular place.

What makes a fake?

The collective activity of transmedia fashion is not limited to authorized inputs by creative professionals. Fashion, perhaps more than other creative forms, depends on use by consumers to activate its meaning. For consumers, some objects resonate within the network and some do not, and official authorization is not necessarily a precondition of tenability. An official licensed product can be read as inauthentic, as in the case of one consumer I interviewed, who found the authorized Prada LG phone particularly laughable - a much less valuable and meaningful item than her iconic (but fake) Prada backpack. In fashion, resonance within networked, transmediated brand meaning, depends on an authenticity that cannot be conferred by the official brand managers alone.

In a message on the microblogging website Twitter, rapper Jim Jones asked if, "GUCCI & LOUIE THAT WAS CUSTOM MADE BY SOME1 NOT THE STORE IS IT OFFICIAL?" Indeed, the collective, disaggregated, unauthorized nature of transmedia fashion may also lead to confusion about what exactly makes a fake a fake. Indeed, there are many similar objects carrying different types of status -- handcrafted fakes, legal close-copies, fakes for which there is no original, smuggled fakes (and stolen reals)-- that confuse and confound easy definitions of realness and fakeness.

In his reading of authenticity at the New Salem Historical Site reconstruction of a village in Illinois where Abraham Lincoln lived in the 1830s, anthropologist Edward Bruner offers some language to use for talking about "authentic reproductions," and what makes things real or fake. Bruner sets up a contrast between his "constructivist" perspective, which argues that "culture is emergent, always alive, and in process" and the "post-modern" perspective of Baudrillard and Eco, who contend that the present condition has generated the loss of a distinction between the "original" and the "true" and the "simulacra," or simulated real (1984:407). His issue with this argument is the notion that this condition is unique to the post-modern, "electronic age" and instead argues that this is "human condition," that "all cultures continually invent and reinvent themselves" (1984:407). In short, the true, the real, and the authentic are, to Bruner, always socially constructed, and that this is not evidence of some kind of historical decline.

In terms of his example, Bruner outlines four possible definitions of authenticity. The first hinges on mimesis, on being "credible and convincing... believable to the public" (1984:399). The second goes further, requires not just believability, but "genuineness." A historical site authentic in the first sense would allow a member of the public today to walk

in and say, in Bruner's example, "This looks like 1830s New Salem." An authentic historical site in the second sense would have to achieve enough historical verisimilitude to allow a member of the public in of New Salem in the 1830s to walk in and say, "This looks like New Salem in the 1830s" (1984:399). Both of the first forms hinge on a degree of verisimilitude, the first requiring enough to seem credible, the second enough to feel genuine. In the third form, authenticity requires originality, but as Bruner points out, in this sense, no (historical) reproduction could be authentic, though one might be construed to be as if the "luster" of a few collocated originals "rubbed off on the reproductions." In the fourth sense, authenticity means to be authorized, legitimated. Here, authenticity "merges into the notion of authority." Bruner adds: "The more fundamental questions here is not to ask if an object or site is authentic, but rather, who has the power to authenticate" (1984:400).

Thus, "no longer is authenticity a property inherent in an object, forever fixed in time; it is seen as a struggle, a social process, in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation [...] and agency and desire become part of the discourse" (1984:408). Bruner's registers of authenticity enable multiple evaluative stances. They enable an examination of the context of which each meaning is significant to avoid the false dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic.

smuggled fakes and stolen reals

When Kayla, a 23 year-old college student, goes shopping for fakes in New York City's Chinatown, she doesn't need to know exactly what she's looking for, but she knows it when she sees it. She spots a True Religion logo and is trying on a pair of jeans while their vendor and I stand around her, holding up giant white tees as a makeshift dressing room. "Are you sure this is a size 28?" she asks, unable to button the jeans. A few minutes later

we're back stalking the narrow streets off Canal. "I wish fakes ran in the same size as real ones. We just gotta find the ones that are made in the same factory," she says, annoyed but determined.

What is the difference between a real pair of True Religion jeans and a fake one? In this case, the difference, at least in Kayla's experience today, is sizing. Kayla says that she once found a pair of 7 for All Mankind jeans (a brand that was popular before True Religions) that she was certain were made in the real factory. "They even made my butt do that thing the real ones do," she said. Nonetheless, she never talked about these 7 for All Mankind jeans as being diverted real jeans. Instead, they were perfect fakes. A fake pair of jeans, then, is different from a stolen-but-real pair of jeans because, even if they were made at the same factory, possibly with the same materials, perhaps by the same people as the real, they were made secretly in the after hours, unauthorized by 7 for All Mankind jeans, never imagined to be part of the real supply chain. They were born fake. They satisfied Bruner's first levels of authenticity. Because they looked just like 7 for All Mankind jeans, they were credibly authentic. Because they made Kayla's "butt do that thing," they had a genuine fit. They even were even original. Chanel describes the sewing machines that mass-produce its classic quilted bags as "designed by Chanel engineers" (Fashion Office, 2008). If used to sew fakes, these machines can confer originality upon them. Nevertheless, these afterhours products remain illegitimate, unauthorized, although they meet other registers of authenticity.

In contrast to branded luxury goods that are smuggled out of the real factory, branded luxury goods that are shoplifted retain their authenticity. The 2009 *New York* magazine special on Spring Fashion included a profile of Kevahn Thorpe, a 17-year-old who

shoplifted tens of thousands of dollars of designer clothes and accessories, though he was arrested on more than one occasion, and now, as a repeat offender, faces more serious penalties. The article, though not going so far as to encourage juvenile delinquency, is admiring of Thorpe, describing him not as a tacky pretender, as Thomas would characterize people who buy fakes, but as an incorrigible aficionado with the good taste to illegally obtain the real rather than purchase illegal fakes. Thorpe calls his shoplifting “crafting,” almost as though he were an artisan, bringing the luxury branded goods into being himself through this work, or conjuring a spell to pluck them from another world. This practice is referred to in the article as an “elaborate shell game” and the article implies that maybe one day he’ll find a way to use his “Rain Man–like specificity and devotion” to brands and styles in a legitimate career in the fashion industry. Both Thorpe and Kayla were exploiting the mechanics of the fashion industry, both found an opportunity to divert the flow of goods. Because the items Thorpe stole were diverted after they had been authorized, they are considered real. Because the goods Kayla purchased were diverted before they could be authorized, they are considered fake. Thorpe seems glamorous but has to serve time. Kayla is judged socially and by journalists like Thomas, but not punished legally.

Branded luxury fashion, in these examples, is called real when there is no question about its authorization. In the case of fakes that satisfy the first three levels of authenticity—credibility, verisimilitude, and originality—an appeal has been made to authorization, which determines whether they are labeled real or fake. However, there are several kinds of fakes that lack an original referent and are thus not copies at all, further complicate the question of what makes something real.

copies for which there is no original

Fakes like the ones Shelly saw in Chinatown are considered to be “bad fakes” because they are generic designs to which any logo could be affixed. A bag can be a Prada or a Chanel or a Louis Vuitton, depending on the preference of the consumer. This usually makes them arbitrary and hence inadequate, meaningless. They contain too little semiotic specificity to evoke any of brand attributes or cultural meaning. One connoisseur consumer of fakes described a “horridal” bag “that had a botkier body but a chloe paddington lock ,” that is, in the form of one “It bag” with the salient detail of another.

However, it is possible for fakes that are poor copies to be valuable. One item that was popular with a group I tagged along with was a keychain with small charms of Chanel logos, the brand’s signature camellia blossom, and little silver vials marked with No. 5 in the manner of the classic perfume. The keychain was well made, each charm sufficiently heavy and detailed. For members of the group, each of whom purchased one, it was sufficiently Chanel-*like*. It didn’t matter that Chanel had never produced any such keychain. In order to be valuable, copies that lack an original must, in Bruner’s sense, be credible even if they lack verisimilitude. Because they are both mass-produced and unauthorized, they are called “fake” by those I talked with, but can still be authentic cultural expressions, and, as such, can contribute to the networked meaning of the brand. Nevertheless, there, depending on the way the item is ultimately deployed, an implicit false claim to the keychain having been produced by Chanel. Unlike the other instances, which made this claim—an of transgression or appropriate or both—on both the brand and the object, it depends only on the brand, complicating even the word “copy.”

Another kind of fake that lacks an original is that which is handcrafted or modified. Like the custom-made but not store-bought Gucci and Louis Vuitton referred to by Jim Jones in his twitter, whether or not these objects are “official” is negotiable and contested. Indeed, a pair of Nike Air Force Ones that have been meticulously taken apart and customized with Gucci logo print fabric (which may or may not be produced by authorized textile producers) would authentically draw from and contribute to the transmedia well of Gucci. Because they are not a copy of a real item, they are not subject to evaluation in terms of verisimilitude. However, they can be genuine and, as one-of-a-kind items, are original.

The Counterfeit Crochet Project, an online group that allows member to make and share crochet and knitting patterns that approximate designer goods. The endeavor is described on its website as “debasement and defiling designer items one step at a time...” The makers of these bags endeavor to simultaneously admire and make fun of branded fashion. Those who make and carry crocheted Dior bags communicate an interest in brands and their transmediated meaning while engaging in what Bourdieu calls aesthetic distancing, separating themselves from those who consume fakes in a less self-aware manner. The visual artist who runs the sites writes, referring to crochet, “I personally find it fun and funny to try to translate high-end designer goods into a rather ‘lowly’ medium,” but it is clear that she views this “DIY Handbag Anarchy” as a critical alternative to “capitalist factory production and distribution channels,” and considers “the impetus to handmake something in an era of mass production a personal and perhaps even political act, a way to give yourself agency to create and produce in an age of standardization and retail.”

Fakes that do not require faithful verisimilitude to an original require greater genuineness in order to be valuable. A genuine relationship to the collective transmedia

meaning of the brand allows for authentication, authorization, beyond the official production channels. These objects can then contribute to the transmedia meaning of the brand as well as a draw from it. This genuineness and unauthorized authority may also work in conjunction with originality, especially when the objects are handcrafted or modified.

conclusion

Today, branded luxury fashion relies more on branding—transmediated semiotics—than on luxury—well-crafted high-end materiality—for meaning and value. Because both the real and the fake are often mass-produced under similar conditions and because the value of brand is networked, portable, and collectively produced, it is possible for the fakes to tap into cultural meaning of the brand as authentically as the real. However, “real” and “fake” remain active categories into which objects fall, no matter how authentically they may draw from, and even contribute to, the ecosystem of the brand. In this sense, “real” or “fake” describes the relationship of the object to authority. “Reals” are not authentic so much as authenticated. Thus, “fakes” can cease to be a pejorative term and is instead simply a descriptor that coexists with other evaluative terms. Nevertheless, this still describes the meaning and value of fakes in relationship to the real. The following chapter, which uses the site of exchange as an appropriate evocative moment in the biography of fakes, describes how these objects can attain authenticity *as fakes*.

Chapter Two – Exchanges

“I wouldn't know how to find eBay on the computer if my life depended on it.” –Marc Jacobs

real Louis Vuitton, fake Chinatown

Steps outside the Brooklyn Museum, graffiti-splattered metal pull-down doors and dingy, sun-bleached awnings adorn street stalls. A pushcart offers up familiar street food. The bags, a variety of sizes and colors, all covered in Louis Vuitton logos, are in rows on plastic-bag covered tables or slung from hooks or laid out on blankets on the ground. Shoppers examine the wares, scrutinize, wrapped up in the atmosphere, make spontaneous decisions to buy or give a cautious no thanks. At least one stall, its door shut, bears a weathered bright orange “Closed by Ordinance” sticker.

This is not a Chinatown street market selling fake Louis Vuitton bags, but a fake Chinatown street market selling real Louis Vuitton bags. The customers are celebrities from the fashion world and beyond as well as wealthy benefactors. The 10 stalls, battered just for the event, are for the opening night of a “©Murakami,” a retrospective of Japanese artist and frequent Louis Vuitton collaborator Takashi Murakami. The bags are not only

real, they are limited editions from the “Monogramouflage,” Murakami’s newest collection, and they are only available at this event. Then, they will only be available at the Brooklyn Museum, which, as part of the exhibit, has set up a fully functioning Louis Vuitton boutique. The rest of the world, even the Louis Vuitton flagship store in Manhattan, will have to wait.

A fake Chinatown selling real bags is clever, sure. Candid shots of Louis Vuitton creative director Marc Jacobs and model Eva Herzigova playfully haggling over a bag in this artfully bleak but strangely well-lit world make excellent publicity photos. And the entire show, from the title, to the non-incidental inclusion of a retail outlet, acknowledges and plays with the interplay of commerce and art in Murakami’s work and in fashion in general. The faux Chinatown scene indicates that far from being a parasitic blight, knock-offs have become part of what we think about when we think about branded luxury fashion, both in terms of art and industry. “Almost every time I see a Louis Vuitton logo print bag, I assume it’s fake,” one consumer of knock-offs told me. “Why would anyone spend so much on something so ubiquitous, easy to copy, and relatively chintzy to begin with?” Murakami and Jacobs, when they took the classic print and added neon-colored cartoons or placed it over camouflage, seemed to be playing with these assumptions. Authorized fashion, if it is to understand itself as an industry, must be aware of the prevalence of knock-offs. Fakes have become part of the networked, transmedia meaning of the real.

The simulated Canal Street market also underscores, as suggested in Chapter 1, that how, where, and among whom fashion is exchanged is an important part of how its meaning and value are produced. A bag purchased in this setting is not merely a bag, but an amalgam of information, both physical and symbolic. It is the fact of this elaborate setup, along with the creative labor that went into designing and constructing it. It is the story of

having been present at the opening and the exclusivity of being among the first allowed to make this purchase. And like a replica bag that draws from a brand's networked transmedia meaning, this replica street market similarly draws from the rich well of meaning of the real Chinatown.

The experience at the site of exchange is part of the transmedia meaning of fashion. Because different sites of exchange produce different experiences, they consequently produce different meanings. Certainly, just as a fake Chinatown produces a meaning that is tied to and distinct from a real Chinatown, the meanings produced through different exchanges can interplay with each other while remaining specific to the original experience. As different sites of exchange, opposing social venues, produce different transmedia meanings, they consequently produce different expectations of what the product *is* and how it can be valued, which in part determines the conditions of their exchange. In the *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel suggests that objects are not valuable because they are inherently difficult to acquire, but that "we call those objects valuable which resist our desire to possess them" (1990: 67). Nevertheless, this resistance is something that can be overcome through economic exchange, the reciprocated sacrifice of one thing for another. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, summarizes, "the economic object does not have an absolute value as a result of the demand for it, but the demand, as the basis for a real or imagined exchange, endows the object with value" (1986:4). But, as Daniel Miller points, value is contextual. "Value is as value does," he writes (2008:1131).

In the supply chain of counterfeit luxury goods, the site and moment of exchange is particularly pivotal because it produces an essential element of the transmedia meaning

and creates value via exchange in Simmel's sense. These two traits, meaning and value, cannot be totally distinguished from each other and operate almost cyclically in reference to each other. Meaning is the basis upon which commodities are evaluated in preparation for exchange. The experience of the moment of exchange in which value is created is part of the transmediated meaning.

Although it is often assumed that the primary value of luxury branded goods is conspicuous consumption, as Dana Thomas describes, the branded luxury goods that are being copied are not, in fact, restricted by price of law to elites. Certainly, all branded lines offer couture and high-end items that are outside the price range of most people who would be identified as "elite," but no sumptuary laws govern access to this consumption. In fact, Thomas is clear that branded luxury is can no longer be used as a reliable indicator of elite status. Even real handbags covered in those LVs can be purchased at outlets, on eBay, and second hand at prices many people well beyond the scope of the elite "first class passengers" of the past that Thomas imagines. And if we take even lower-end dispersion and other less expensive luxury brand items to be part of the transmediated meaning of the brand, an even larger range of consumers can gain access. What I have called the transmedia production of branded luxury goods, then, can be seen as marketing designed to take ordinary, mass-produced, cheap products and make them seem like luxury, like something restricted to an elite class even when they are not. The classic and frequently copied Louis Vuitton Speedy handbag, and nearly every other knocked-off item, does not fit this first criteria of luxury any more than its copy does. What, then, is being copied? I would argue that the assumption that fake branded luxury items are primarily used as a way to

falsely signal simple monetary elite status is not only the least interesting aspect of the phenomenon of fakes, but it is also inaccurate.

A high-end brand (real) allows consumers to demonstrate their ability to purchase an item that is more expensive than other items of the same category. The very words "brand name" and "designer" evoke conspicuous consumption and social stratification. In talking about brands as texts, it is important to note that, as Bourdieu describes, there is nothing inherent about aesthetic value. One must understand the context of a work of art or cultural production for it to have any meaning or worth. In any given social setting access to the right kind of education allows an individual to develop the right kind of taste. That taste, in Bourdieu's description, is understood as *correct*, as legitimate culture. Accordingly, a lack of access to this education produces an individual who lacks the taste necessary to decode legitimized culture.

The content of what might constitute legitimate culture and "good taste" may change, but the logic of tastemaking still works. To describe two examples from my own life, elite taste as it was produced among the live-aboard boat community of hippies in Miami was very different than elite taste in High Springs, a small, decidedly southern town in northern Florida. The hierarchy of brands of cowboy boots means nothing in Miami, just as various brands of natural soap mean nothing in High Springs. These systems of taste are not placed within a crisp hierarchy, but rather are situated in relation to each other, along with a plentitude of other systems in a geography so complex, subtle and dynamic that it would be almost impossible to map. No individual is subject to or even aware of just one subsystem.

The three main sites of counterfeit luxury fashion exchange-- street markets, online message boards, and in-home "purse parties"-- each provide a distinct experience which produces a different kind of exchange and differently satisfies (or at least interacts with) a taste system. All three sites feature a commodity exchange (as opposed to gift or some other kind of exchange) on a basic level, in that money is exchanged for a good, although I am more interested in the specific and idiosyncratic culture that exists around these exchanges. The social conditions produced by the exchange at each site reveal that fakes, seemingly identical objects, in fact possess an authenticity, in Bruner's multivalent and constructivist sense, which is native to that site of exchange.

Street Markets²

From what well of meaning (or culture?) were Murakami and the Brooklyn Museum drawing when they replicated a fake Chinatown street market? More than simply gesturing toward the black market in fakes, the set references a mysterious and artfully grimy underworld, an illicit site of exchange. Clearly, an essential feature of street market shopping is the place itself, but is the transmedia meaning this site offers completely dependent on a romanticized othering of Chinatown?

Two sisters I met, Ellen and Kayla³, come to New York from Georgia a couple of times per year to see their grandparents, who live on Long Island. Ellen is in her mid-

² Although the focus of this section will be on Chinatown, as the majority of my interlocutors shopping in New York City's Chinatown, I've chosen to call it "Street Markets" because a surprisingly significant number of interlocutors also purchased counterfeit luxury goods in street markets elsewhere, particularly Asian countries. Their experiences resonate enough with that of Chinatown shoppers to work with their experiences while developing these representative composites. However, it is worth mentioning that these transnational consumers are yet another subset that would be worth investigating in their own right.

³ I want to take a moment to re-emphasize that all descriptions of interlocutors are composites with identifying details changes. I have tried to develop profiles and scenarios that are qualitatively representative of multiple individuals. "Ellen" and "Kayla," though not directly based on an actual pair of sisters, each represent two distinct types-- clusters of traits and attitudes-- that emerged among interlocutors at this site. I chose to make these composites sisters because the consumers at this site tended to work in pairs, often close friends or family members.

twenties and lives and works in Atlanta. Kayla is a few years younger and is a student at the University of Georgia in Athens. Once per trip, they take the train into the city to spend a full day in Chinatown shopping for fakes. For the sisters, it has become an essential part of their short trip, even at the cost of spending time with their family, and it has even become a point of tension with their mother. Sometimes a cousin or a family friend will tag along. One day during their summer trip, I get to play third wheel.

More so than any in any other setting, Ellen and Kayla, like all consumers of counterfeit fashion at street markets, are consuming place and experience as much as the objects themselves, and this experience becomes an important part of the transmedial meaning of the ultimate object. Because they spend the whole day in Chinatown, it takes stamina and planning. Although both young women describe themselves as concerned with fashion, they “dress down” for the Chinatown excursion. As if preparing for a hiking trip, they wear comfortable, layered clothing and carry water bottles and trail mix. In a system they developed over the years, they bring an otherwise empty backpack containing another bag for toting purchases back to Long Island. Although they don’t buy large amounts, they want to be sure that bulky items are not crushed and, more importantly, that each new vendor they approach throughout the day is not aware of their previous purchases.

Ellen tells me that she’s a little bit embarrassed to be interviewed about fakes. When I ask her why, she says that they’re just a little bit silly. She tells me that, really, she comes for “the culture.” If she had it her way, they’d eat at a “real Chinese restaurant” and visit other kinds of shops, and “buy some jade or something.” She says, laughing, that she’d like to schedule an appointment sometime with a “Chinese doctor and get herbs for weight loss.” Ultimately, she explains, “For me, it’s not really about the fakes.” Kayla shoots her a

look, "Oh, I'm so sure." The sisters begin to argue, trying to come to a consensus about how to describe their experience to me. "Really, it's about Chinatown, the hustle and bustle and all that," Ellen says, defending her position to Kayla. "Yeah I guess," Kayla demurs, "I mean, I feel like we'd get in more trouble with our family if we were just spending the day shopping in SoHo. This is, a *thing to do*."

As invested in place, in the "hustle and bustle" Chinatown as Ellen claims to be, Kayla seems even more invested in space, in its actual geographical layout. She knows where the public bathrooms are (McDonald's, for one) and jokes that she knows the street layout of this small bit of Manhattan intimately while having "absolutely no idea" about the rest of the island. Although Kayla claims to be less interested in the "culture" of Chinatown than her sister, she seems thoroughly engaged with the experience of the excursion. She was the one who developed the systems for preparing and getting the most out of it.

For Kayla, the thrill of acquisition is an important part of what she is consuming. "Honestly, a lot this stuff is all the same, so you want to make sure you get the best deal," she tells me, rejecting a pair of Dior sunglasses. She is patient, wants to find the very best she can, perhaps even, like the True Religion jeans of Chapter One, stuff made in the same factory as the real. "You have to be able to know how to haggle," she says, "you have to know that if you walk away leaving the vendor smiling, you've been taken, but you also have to know that there is a difference between bargaining and treating people disrespectfully. You don't want to piss them off because then they'll just shut down." She is certain that it's all hiding somewhere there in Chinatown, waiting to be found. Being able to figure out the secret to getting what she wants requires an investment of time, a navigation

of an intricate geography, and a negotiation of a complex transaction. A successful purchase is a certification of prowess.

Ellen, who says that she would never “seriously” use a fake herself “unless it is really, really good,” buys a lot of gifts. These are inexpensive items, mostly playful-- rhinestone door-knocker Chanel earrings, a Lacoste polo shirt with a pregnant-looking alligator. She is only comfortable giving kitschy presents. “I wouldn’t want anyone to think that I think that they would want a fake unless it was funny or cool in some other way. It’s about me thinking of them in New York, not because I want them to think that they should have some kind of status symbol.”

Kayla buys gifts, too, but her approach is very different. “No one at U-GA really knows what the latest Balenciaga or whatever is, you know? But they know that if they see the name, that it’s worth something.” Thus, Kayla is looking for something that looks and feels “real,” even if it’s not an exact copy of an original. She goes for believability over verisimilitude, convincingness as in Bruner’s first level of authenticity. She buys items for people who can’t come here themselves, and the fact that she is someone who regularly travels to New York City from the south itself has cache in her circle. Giving her friends fakes increases their status as well as hers. She also buys more expensive items for people who make requests and will pay her back for them. “Anyone who lives around here can get these, but in Georgia it’s a big deal because no one I know, anyway, can get them down there,” she says. Value changes when it crosses state lines. Although this scarcity alone makes the fakes more valuable in themselves, some of people she shops for do not want anyone to know that their bags are counterfeit. To buy a bad or funny fake would be to betray their confidence and diminish her contribution.

Although the meaning of the bags and what makes them valuable are qualitatively different for both sisters, the having-been-there is equally important to both. In this sense, to both, the fakes become a luxury associated with their elite status of being able to travel to New York City and invest the time and energy into purchasing them. This is not to suggest that these objects do not have meaning or value beyond representing this experience, but they are largely souvenirs. Although shopping is the focused activity of their trip, they are tourists. The acquisition of the fake is part of what they are consuming when they acquire it, and this complex mode of acquisition is both the process and the product of this consumptive labor.

As with counterfeit luxury goods, the question of “authenticity” is of much interest to the study of tourism. MacCannell (1973) proposed that tourism is the modern equivalent of religious pilgrimage in that “both are quests for authentic experiences” (1973:593). Because everyday modern life is alienating and shallow, “reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles” (1973:593) and tourism beckons. However, tourism sites are arranged such that the tourists may feel that they are having an authentic experience, entering a “back” region, as MacCannell uses Goffman to describe it, when in fact they have not. Ultimately, MacCannell argues, “once tourists have entered touristic space, there is no way out for them so long as they press their search for authenticity” (1971:601).

Authenticity does not drive every tourist expedition; Feifer calls the tourist who is not pressing for authenticity the “post-tourist” (1985). Rather than set up a dichotomy between an unfulfilling normal life that drives one to search for meaning in other cultures via travel, the post-tourist “knows that they are tourists and tourism is a game, or rather a

whole series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience” (Williams, 2004:60). Rojek and Urry (1997) characterize the post-tourist as aware of the commoditization process of the tourist experience and treats it playfully, as an end in itself without needing to justify it as self-improvement. Post-tourists, such as Kayla, are savvy consumers who are clear about their role in the undesirable consequences of tourism and have “little patience for those who take them as fools on these accounts” (Lew, 2006).

Kayla does not feel at all guilty that she does not see Chinatown as an improving “cultural experience.” She feels no need to justify her shopping in fakes with more edifying activities, such as buying quintessential souvenirs that would indicate an appreciation of the “Chinese-ness” of the place. It is not the idea of Chinatown as some kind of authentic (in terms of genuineness, Bruner’s second sense) entanglement with a cultural other that is most important to the transmedial meaning of the site, but a more authentic (in the same sense) economic experience through which she encounters Chinatown in less romantic terms. She similarly does not feel the need to take a postmodern turn and distance herself from the souvenirs of this experience, explaining them away as kitsch. She is authentically a post-tourist, for better or for worse, and the fakes become an authentic souvenir.

Although Ellen might seem not to be as self-aware, more uncomfortable, and less of a post-tourism (as it might be positively construed), she too is playing a more complex game than might first be apparent. I notice that she always asks the vendors if they have Marc Jacobs and, inevitably, they show her some version of the Stam, an oversized handbag with quilted leather and chunky gold chain strap. It looks like a classic quilted-with-chain-strap Chanel purse translated into anime and back again. Named for alien-baby-face model Jessica Stam and carried by countless celebrities, it is, Ellen and I both know, everywhere--

on young mothers in yoga clothes, on well-appointed undergraduates in skinny jeans, in Forever 21 and Aldo as legal knockoffs, and here, on Canal street.

Ellen always shakes her head and asks if they have anything else. I ask her about this, and she says, "The only fake I'd really spend money on is something I'd actually really want. I love Marc Jacobs. His designs are just a lot more *me* than this other stuff. It's not that I'm against fakes, I just think a lot of this stuff is cheesy." I ask her why she doesn't go for the Stam and she says, "Really, I'd never use it. I'd just chicken out and give it to Kayla. The only fake I'll carry is one no one will ever guess is fake. So that works with Marc Jacobs because they don't exist except for the Stam. And, if I ever do find it, I'll be happy. It's a good system."

Nevertheless, when she's in Chinatown with Kayla, they are equally engaged consumers. Ellen examines the seams of bags even more closely than Kayla, and asks vendors to hold up a lighter to the bags to prove that they are leather as claimed and will not melt. I ask her why she is doing this even though she knows she's really not going to buy it. "I don't know," she responds, "it's the fun of it. Acting like you're really scrutinizing is part of being what's expected here. It's part of the fun." By setting for herself this futile task, she is able to balance the gap between her taste in fashion and her taste in tourism. She is as conscious, at least in this respect, of the game and role she is playing within as Kayla. The *absence* of the perfect Marc Jacobs fake is an authentically absent souvenir of her own post-tourist experience with Chinatown.

For Kayla and Ellen, there is a certain privilege, a cache in even being able to travel from the south to New York City. Fakes are not widely sold in Athens or even Atlanta, so they are able to gain cache back home by those who will either assume that their fakes are

real or be impressed with them as fakes, as souvenirs of a trip not everyone gets to take. Even if the branded objects are fake, perhaps not even fakes of the highest quality, their scarcity relative difficulty to purchase makes them an authentic luxury. But it is not simply Kayla and Ellen's ability to act as a conduit between their friends and the fakes that makes these objects meaningful to them. Kayla finds satisfaction in the conclusion of a successful purchase, and Ellen, who has less investment in the tangible product of this activity, finds satisfaction in her inconclusive search, but for both, this particular context and set of practices as they are able to embody them are what makes the acquisitions of fakes in street markets an authentic experience.

They do not think of it as an "authentic Chinese" or even Chinese-American experience, a replica of some kind of real cultural or historical phenomena like Bruner's New Salem, so it can't be judged authentic on the basis of verisimilitude, credibility, originality, or authority. For them, Chinatown can't be even be evaluated as inauthentic because it is not a reproduction of anything and neither, as souvenirs of this experience with additional resulting transmedia semiotic information, are their fakes.

Online Message Boards

Long before I became academically interested in fakes I was aware, in the abstract, that they were available online. Tiffany and Co. recently lost a high-profile lawsuit against eBay, claiming that the site turned a blind eye to the selling of counterfeit product (Slashdot, 2009). Indeed, although eBay claims that 100% of listings reported to the Verified Rights Owners program are deleted within 12 hours and that precautions are taken to prevent repeat offenders from closing and starting new accounts serially, a simple search of nearly any high-end brand name on the auction site will bring up hundreds of

listings that, while they don't state that they are fake, seem questionable. Multiple listings from one user selling "New With Tags" Louis Vuitton handbags, all listed as "Buy It Now" for a shocking low price? There are buyer's guides that give advice on buying fakes, but a large amount of designer products on eBay seem to be highly dubious. From watching auctions, though, I found that it seemed like these products didn't move too quickly. After fruitlessly looking for it on eBay, I began to wonder where this supposedly fertile online trade in counterfeit was located. Certainly it was not just a myth?

Then, while perusing an invitation-by-members-only fashion-related message board, thefashionspot.com, of which I was a member, I noticed that in the handbags section there was a long-running and active thread called "iOffer Bags, Lushfashions.com, etc. (Please read the rules in post #1)." I knew iOffer to be an e-commerce site, but I'd never spent any time on it. This was my first exposure to the messageboard-based trade in high-end "replicas." Here members never call their items fake, counterfeit, or knock-offs. Here, they are always referred to as "replicas" or, more commonly, "reps." Inexpensive bags from Chinatown are "fakes," and unbranded designer-inspired legal bags are knock-offs. The reals are usually referred to as "auths." But that is only the beginning and the most obvious of the specialized language. At first, I had a hard time parsing the posts. For example, one member wrote, "I am trying to decide if I should get a nbf vert deau city in GGH or SGH ... please help!" The response? "I like PT's but not the GGH. So now we know that authentic VD's comes in Twiggy, City RH and PT GGH?"

This jargon is shorthand that emerged out of convenience inside a community of highly invested members who know their shared area of interest well enough to make good use of abbreviations. However, this lack of transparency is indicative of the larger character

of the group. Because the selling of replica is illegal, much of the discussion, including specifics of seller's names and websites, can only be conducted over private messages (PMs). The rules are explicitly stated in at the start of each new thread, which are started when the old one reaches the maximum number of posts allowed on the forum:

1. Do not post links to seller websites or type them (bagmaker dot com). If you need info on a supplier, please pm another member, or search to see what person received the infolast and pm them.
2. Please do a search first if you want info on the quality of a specific seller. You can also check out pictures in the Ioffer Pictures thread.
3. ALL images must have an image credit or they will be deleted.
4. No selling or spamming will be allowed. You are allowed to create a "wish list" in your signature, but you cannot continue to spam the boards asking other members to help you get a certain bag/color produced.

The last rule makes clear, this is a consumer site for the discussion of purchasing from particular vendors, not a point of contact or exchange between buyers and sellers. Although it is likely that vendors monitor the board, they do not post and the posts never address them as if they were lurking. A user explains it all to me in a private message (PM):

Oh lol ebay. NO ONE with any sense goes on ebay. I honestly don't know who is buying all that stuff for there to be a law suit. Maybe in the past? Anyway, most people moved on to iOffer but now we mostly just deal with the same sellers who are on iOffer [ebay?] but only through personal recommendations from the forum members. Sometimes if someone is looking something that no one has a contact for and none of the usual sellers can get, they'll go onto ioffer and look for someone who has it. It's always a gamble, you can't forget that. But, it's good when they can report back.

This "reporting back" is an essential part of how clout is made on the message board. In order even to find out the contact information of the best vendors, a new user must first gain access to the information being passed around on PMs and break the code on the main message board.

They must then, in order to have access to the latest information-- vendors sometimes disappear when sites are shutdown, only providing new contact information to

known repeat clients and board leaders-- maintain their presence in the community on the site. This is accomplished by providing support, opinions, and information to other members but also by asking for this kind of feedback in a way that demonstrates knowledge and savvy. For example, if a member posts images of a subpar Marc Jacobs Stam in purple, forgets to cite the image, and asks the group what they think, they will curtly be informed, "I'm not sure if you care about this kind of detail, but the Stam was never produced in eggplant." On the other hand, the user who solicited help deciding whether she should get a "nbf vert deau city in GGH or SGH," received many replies, with users not only weighing in with their opinion, but also comparing notes in a similarly coded fashion on how and from whom she should try to purchase it once she'd made her decision, both on the message board and in PMs.

Elite status in community is conferred through a variety of mechanisms. Having special access to and relationships with vendors is highly valued. A member might appeal in a post to "someone with buying power" when they are unable to find something, hoping that their higher-status member can influence a vendor to carry the desired item. A member might subtly brag that they "chat over gmail" with a vendor, but most are careful to take only so much responsibility, not wanting to be connected to a bad deal. When a member found herself being too closely associated with one seller, she posted:

I'll feel bad if anyone here get a bad bag from fabaaa as i was the one talking about her all the time, lol but, as i always said, it was my own observation based on what i got from her. this is what i do when i order from her. i'm not her agent. first, i check pics of her bags out, compare w the real. then save her pics and the authentic pics, compare them side by side and DRAW out the flaw, or to REMARK the important things that most replicas in the market tend to have (replacement...)that way, she can send it to her assistant in china, check the pic, go check out the bag in person, compare it, then report back if they have the one i want. if not, it saves them from trouble. as once they buy the bag, they can only exchange for something else. it also

save ur time, right? please talk to her, tell her what you want, dont just trust me (that's nice, but...) lol....'

Through this post, she was able to distance herself from “fabaaa” but also provide tips for protocol that maintained her status as a knowledgeable and helpful member. “You always get the best replicas” is one of the most flattering compliments one member can pay to another. Access to vendors, then, is not an end in itself. In fact, being overly connected and loyal in posts to a vendor whose product quality is consistently suspect will lower a member’s status, potentially even giving way to the suspicions that that the member is the vendor’s “agent” and not a legitimate member of the community, certainly not to be trusted for objective information.

“Getting the best replicas” entails knowing not just who to get them from but what constitutes one. Expectation of quality is very high, both in terms of the construction of the bag and in terms of verisimilitude. These replicas are not inexpensive, ranging from close to \$100 for a small, simple, common item to several hundred for larger, more complex, or rarer one. Members know if the font on the (fake) serial number inside a bag’s inner pocket is off. A bag might be returned to a vendor if it “had WAY too obvious perforations,” but if the “lining of the black is a little stiffer and thicker than the auth,” but is otherwise perfect, the member will likely note this in her report to the forum and keep the bag.

Members often also spend time of ThePurseForum.com, or TPF, as it is called, a site for passionate consumers of real luxury goods. The official stance of TPF’s moderators is explicitly anti-counterfeit and all detailed information about the reals is ostensibly meant to protect consumers against unwittingly purchasing fakes. However, those who are active on both sites often play both sides, advising consumers of the reals on TPF, who are often less invested in scrutinizing fine details like serial number font, while collecting from them

for first-hand information on the these very details. One of the criteria of luxury that Appadurai describes in the introduction to *The Cultural Life of Things* is that complexity of acquisition needs to be a function of actual scarcity, and replica handbags of this quality truly are scarce, perhaps even more so than the reals they replicate (38).

Because they demand such close verisimilitude in order to justify making a purchase and are so vocal in reviewing their purchases in the forum, vendors, in order to make a sale, must be willing to go back to their sources and adjust, replacing the lining or fixing the font on the serial number. If a particular product is not available from any trusted vendors, a member might start a list of others who are willing to make the purchase if the vendor can provide a product that meets their criteria. Often, only very small runs, less than ten, of these special orders are produced and made available. Collectively, these consumers have an almost couture-like relationship with the vendors.

Like stereotypical couturiers, vendors who cater to message board clients can be temperamental. They often do not respond to inquires for days, member post about it, and others will tell them to “hang in there, I’m sure you’ll hear back soon.” One popular vendor is notorious for advertising in e-mail certain products in certain colors but then, even 20 minutes later, no longer having them in stock. Although the would-be purchaser often seems annoyed in their posts, these inconsistencies of customer service are tolerated, as long quality and verisimilitude are not compromised. Indeed, as frustrating as this would seem to be, it gives the member something to post and commiserate about and becomes a foible that is nonetheless part of the experience of shopping in this context.

The owner of just one fake, a “perfect” blue Hermes Birkin bag, told me, when I asked about his definition of luxury, that is was “in essence, about suffering.” At the time of

the interview, I frankly thought that he was being melodramatic, perhaps even repeating some pithy Coco Chanel quote, and, trying to be a good novice ethnographer, pushed him to elaborate, to be more “honest.” But although he did not purchase his Birkin online but, uniquely in my research, through a “friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend in the early 1990s NYC drag scene,” the statement does seem to ring true here. It is the “suffering,” the wondering, the frustration, the degree to which, as Simmel put it, these objects “resist” the desire to be owned, that both makes a messageboard user part of a community of connoisseurs and increases the value of the object. Even if the Birkin owner had been quoting when he told me about luxury as suffering, perhaps he was drawing from a fashion world script that similarly allowed him to share an evaluative stance with others, a mode of understanding and living through and with objects in the context of a particular community.

In the messageboard community, members can also be considered elite if they have an impressive collection of replicas. Collections are built carefully and slowly -- curated. When a member gears up to make a purchase, she typically documents every step of the process, conferring with the forum about what to add to her collection, deciding whom to order from, and posting for critique the pictures the vendor sends her. An impulse purchase of a lower-quality bag shows that the member does not know how to successfully negotiate with the seller, doesn't have the knowledge or the eye for the exact details that distinguish a replica from a shoddy fake, and was not able to leverage the collective intelligence of the community to her advantage. Just being able to spend money is not enough. “If I wanted to just buy a perfect bag,” one member told me in a PM, “I'd just buy a one from the real store.”

The value of these replicas operates differently online and off. In everyday life, an owner of such a perfect replica ostensibly benefits from the same qualities as owners of real bags. They use an extremely well-crafted item in a celebrated and desired design. As with the reals, handbags without obvious external logos, as with a Balenciaga handbag popular on the forum, few people they encounter except those most invested in fashion would even notice that there is anything special about it. This might be a shibboleth for the fashion cognoscenti, but there is no offline way of discerning others who appreciate the replica for all that it is. As one member put it, "In real life, yeah, sure I assume people think my bags are real, but no one appreciates how perfect they are."

David Freedberg cites Jonathan Richardson, in 1719, as defining connoisseurship by three aims, "firstly the making of judgments of quality ('the Goodness of a Picture, as Richardson put it'), secondly the assignment of hands, and thirdly the distinguishing of originals from copies (including, of course, the identification of forgeries)" (31). The most devoted posters of The Fashion Spot's forum of consumers of high-end counterfeit luxury goods are double consumers. A member is a "person in the know" (as African art historian Herbert M. Cole (2003) succinctly and literally defines "connoisseur") (1) about both counterfeits and the luxury branded goods they replicate.

In terms of the reals, they closely follow the collections produced each season by designers, and the messageboard affords them a place to discuss, determine, and instantiate, at least within the community, the "goodness" of designs. They are able to "assign hands" to a variety of designs, knowing on sight and from afar the difference between inconspicuously-branded Balenciaga and Botkier, Chanel and Chloe and within that, the season from which the particular model dates. They are, certainly, able to

distinguish reals and fakes, and are, as mentioned, happy to provide this information to those who seek to purchase second-hand reals. All of this knowledge of reals serves the end of knowing about fakes, but that fact need not undermine it.

I described their connoisseurship as “double” because they are also “in the know” about fakes, and this expertise is overlaid upon their knowledge of the reals. Determining the “goodness” of a fake is not as much about defining aesthetic value as it is for them with the reals, but a good fake, in addition to perfect verisimilitude, relies on the intuition of the connoisseur in that it must also, as one poster wrote of a bag that unfortunately lacked this quality, “zing.” They are able to distinguish among the “hands” of different vendors of fakes, knowing that one makes better Chanel and another makes better Louis Vuitton. They may well be among the world’s best experts at identifying counterfeits, and they take pleasure in owning fakes that few others, even professionals, could distinguish from reals.

According to Cole, few historians in his field “care about connoisseurship,” finding it “an unfashionable, outdated, or elitist activity” (2003:1). He is concerned about this “crisis of connoisseurship,” about the lack of training on the part of younger scholars and the shortage of those able to draw accurate conclusions about quality and authenticity. This is not very different from Thomas, who is concerned about the lack of knowledge about or concern for her “luxury dream.” The messageboard provides an affinity space for this connoisseur community, whose knowledge might be rejected by fashion world insiders like Thomas or unappreciated by the general public.

Purse Parties

The third site of exchange I explored, in-home “purse parties,” is, according sources in journalism and in marketing literature, one of the fastest growing forms of distribution of counterfeit luxury goods. Before a typical purse party, a vendor arrives with a variety of knock-offs, usually handbags and but often other small accessories like sunglasses and scarves, and sets them up in the hostess’s home. Hors d’oeuvres and either fun cocktails or, yes, champagne is served and guests check out the merchandise and make purchases. It is about the purses, but it is also a party. Nevertheless, the hostess usually makes a commission off the total sales.

According to *Time* magazine, “among the ladies-who-lunch crowd, purse parties, where guests buy inexpensive fakes in private homes while they sip champagne, are the latest trend” (Betts, 2004). Most discourse surrounding purse party consumers similarly paint them as wealthier than “typical” consumers of knock-offs. Rachel, in many ways, fits this profile. Although she would certainly not describe herself or her friends as “ladies who lunch,” she does, some slight discomfort or self-effacing embarrassment describe herself as a “normal, you know, upper-middle class, I guess.” A thirty-six-year-old who “works in finance, but not in a role where you make the big bucks,” she lives with her husband, a computer engineer, in affluent Westchester County, just north of New York City. She owns multiple branded luxury goods-- a pair of Prada heels she purchased at an outlet, a Coach handbag, a Bally wallet, a Tag Heuer watch, which she purchased as a “gift to herself” for her last promotion, several pair of premium denim jeans, and lots of Tiffany silver jeweler, which she collects and often receives as gifts from her husband.

Before Rachel got married, her bridal party hosted a combined bridal shower-bachelorette party weekend, which consisted different activities both for her younger

friends and her older relatives, such a spa treatments, a luncheon, and a purse party. In this case, the items were “auctioned off” and the commission was given to Rachel and her fiancé to put toward their honeymoon.

Like most purse parties, Rachel’s was a closed setting, with access limited to the small group of friends and family. Of all three exchange sites treated in this chapter, it is the least public. Unlike message boards, access is gained not by gaining the trust of the community and acquiring the knowledge it takes to participate in it with the hope of making a purchase, but strictly by close social proximity to the hostess, regardless of purchase desire. Even the ability to make contact with a vendor and throw a party is distributed along social lines. To stay under the radar of law enforcement, vendors do not advertise, so passing along a vendor’s phone number only happens among trusted friends. Perhaps because of this protected setting, as a researcher, I was not able to gain access to as many purse party consumers as I was with the other sites. Although Rachel’s case study is unique and even, in a few small ways that I will identify, unusual to purse parties, it nonetheless demonstrates yet another way in which the context and practice of exchange of counterfeit luxury creates meaning and value.

“Everyone buys something just to be polite,” Rachel told me. The exchange is multilayered, with the hostess serving as both a client and a collaborator with the vendor, and the attendees making a clear commodity exchange with the vendor and, in that they are motivated by “politeness” to buy something so that the hostess can make at least enough to cover the cost of throwing the party, a gift exchange with the hostess. In Rachel’s case, the gift exchange was even more overt. The guests overpaid for the items, and the hostess diverted all of the money generated to Rachel’s honeymoon. Rachel thinks that

“money trees” and “money dances,” common wedding rituals where guests give cash to the couple, are “tacky,” But, she said, the “fun of the purse party made it a little bit less embarrassing for people to help us out with the honeymoon.” Because of this, the quality of the items themselves is less important. They are almost just a pretense, a reason to throw a party or, in Rachel’s case, to give a gift. Rachel said that she doubts most of the guest will ever use their purchases “seriously,” but that are valuable as “party favors,” something to remember the weekend by.

This private setting also provide the safety necessary to indulge in knock-off shopping, an illicit act. At night during Rachel’s weekend, the younger set would go out, dancing and drinking and forcing the bride-to-be to perform a variety of mildly transgressive stunts. One night, they went to a sex-toy shop, and then the next day, they hosted a purse party. Rachel characterized both as “fun, silly things to do with the girls before you get married.” The vendor was late, and Rachel’s guests were “abuzz” with speculation about the reason. Might she have gotten busted? Was it a setup? Although the potential of getting arrested at a purse party is low, it does happen. Moet Hennessey Louis Vuitton assisted in 3,400 raids of purse parties from Connecticut to Alabama to California in 2003 alone (Ingrassia, 2004). Rachel was able to cite a couple of news stories she’d seen about vendors getting caught, but she also said, “if it was still making news, it probably didn’t happen very often.” Plus, as with being forced by her friends to buy edible underwear and a penis lollipop from the sex toy shop, the transgression was part of the fun, part of what was being purchased. And like the edible underwear and penis lollipop which would never be consumed, the purses were more of an excuse to transgress than an intrinsically desirable object.

But not everyone, as Rachel put it, “got it.” Her future mother-in-law sat uncomfortably through the purse party, confused and dismayed. Rachel said that she didn’t seem to be worried about whether the purses were violation of law, but that they were violation of taste. She complained about the quality of the bags, even said that she’s rather just give the couple money. She didn’t understand that the fakes were just “silly guilty pleasures, almost like gag gifts.” For the rest, the safety of an already bonded-group allowed them to playfully demonstrate shared taste, to reconstitute their commonality and friendship. Most embarrassingly, Rachel’s mother-in-law, trying to be polite, wound up wearing the Louis Vuitton Murakami watch to the rehearsal dinner a few weeks later. “Ironically,” Rachel said, “in her nice suit, silk Lanvin scarf, and real-crocodile bag, she made the watch look surprisingly authentic.” Even more ironically, this misfire revealed that she was unable to access the other authentic experience embedded in the purses by the other partygoers.

Purse parties, because they are closed events, provide an opportunity for an almost ritualistic tournament of shared taste. In Rachel’s case, it was an opportunity for two families, about to be joined by marriage, to demonstrate a shared set of tastes, which, according to Bourdieu’s logic, would indicate a larger, ideally complementary, habitus of shared experience and values. An invitation to such a private event automatically creates a distinction between those inside a circle and those who are, uninvited, outside of it. Those in the privacy of the circle are also able to exhibit trust, toying with taboos of taste, assuring that everyone, by virtue of their inclusion in the party, is playing the same game by the same rules. The fakes that attendees leave with become authentic symbols of a successful

demonstration of likeness and trust. Rachel's embarrassment by her mother-in-law's misplaying the knock-off game indicated an awkward mismatch, a failure of authenticity.

Conclusion

The expectation of value set by the site of exchange impacts the uses and value in ownership. Microsystems of taste operate in adjacency with other mainstream taste systems, which demonstrates how complex and multivalent taste circles are. The cultural capital produced at each site of exchange produces a kind of authenticity and cultural capital that allows fakes to be authentic as fakes.

Chapter Three: Ownerships

“There are no cheap clothes only cheap people” –Karl Lagerfeld

“Darling, I can tell by the rest of our outfit that your Louis Vuitton Bag is fake”

The Facebook group, “Darling, I can tell by the rest of your outfit that your Louis Vuitton is fake” describes its purpose and mission with the following statement, “Admittedly, SOME copies are not bad depending on where you get them from. But the first thing that will give away the fact that you're wearing fake designer clothes or accessories is what you decide to wear with it. Good luck... ;P” A recent topic on the discussion board asked, “What is worse, fake bags or fake boobs?” Most of the replies shared the opinion of one poster who wrote, “Fake bag is worse.. fake boobs are sometimes a necessity, I'm sorry to say, whereas a fake bag NEVER is,” though the first response echoed the holistic assessment of authenticity promoted by the group, reminding readers, “Bearing in mind that the two are often seen in close proximity ;)”

Indeed, this kind of assessment has been confirmed quantitatively. Richardson (2009) found that social information provided by pictures of branded luxury goods being

used in context, rather than material information provided by the object itself, determined the perceived authenticity of the bag. Because they have developed a perceived ability to differentiate not real bags from fake bags but “real consumers” from “fake consumers,” they are able to continue associating luxury brands with heightened status.

But, for all its certainty about determining the legitimacy of a branded luxury good based on the attire of its owner, the members of the Facebook group seemed to have a difficult time producing a photograph to serve as the profile picture. The first member to point out a problem, “The people in the display [photo] are celebrities. One is Trina the rapper, and the other is a member of T.S so obviously their bags are real.” Another responded, “Celebrity or not, rapper or not, “obviously” the bag is NOT real... LV never ever created such a horrible model!” To which another replied, “Actually LV did create such a ‘horrible model’ - Sept 07 season had monogram + leopard designs like the one shown here.” Finally, the creator of the group wrote, “The bag looks fake to me....maybe it's the outfit that threw me... Anyway, I shall change the photo just in case I am wrong.” Seemingly in frustration, she posts, “God what is WRONG with these people!?!? People who can afford Louis Vuitton don't dress like that do you understand!?!? *sigh* I need another drink.”

Although the members of the Facebook group and the respondents in Richardson's survey may say that they are making an assessment of the authenticity of the branded item based on why it was deployed and juxtaposed with other items, they are actually evaluating not the authenticity of the branded item so much as they are approving the use of the brand in a particular context. It doesn't matter to the members of “Darling, I can tell by the rest of your outfit that your Louis Vuitton is fake” if Trina, as a wealthy celebrity, is carrying a real bag; she does not provide a compatible context for how “people who can afford Louis

Vuitton” dress. The frustrating dissonance is enough to drive the poster to drink, or at least joke about it.

It is tempting to assume that the members of the facebook group exclude Trina as an authentic consumer because she, as an African-American rapper whose lyrics reference her upbringing in housing projects in Miami’s Liberty City neighborhood, is of a lower socioeconomic class than that of the members of “Darling, I can tell by the rest of your outfit that your Louis Vuitton bag is fake.” However, this logic appears to cut both ways. Clarissa, a graduate student who describes herself as being from a “poor Nuyorican family,” has bought and uses fakes mostly from street markets but has been lurking on the fake bag forums on The Fashion Spot, where she is already a regular poster in other sections, particularly the “Trend Watching” forum; she tells me:

I ride the green line everyday, which run by Boston University. You see a lot of these rich BU girls in their sweatpants and their gigantic really nice handbags. Like some little Louis Speedies and then some next level Balenciaga. You know it’s all real. It’s so stupid. What a waste. It’s even worse around Harvard, where they don’t wear sweatpants as much it’s just as boring.

Clarissa assesses the handbags belonging to the “BU girls” as real, but that did not mean, for her, that they were being deployed appropriately. “They can afford anything they want, and they want, and they just have such bad, boring fashion,” she says, “I hate rich people sometimes. They just don’t know how good they have it.” I asked her if she thought that there was a chance their bags were fake, and she responded, “No way. They probably think it’s tacky. Which is ironic when you’re wearing \$200 sweatpants with the word Juicy printed across your ass,” referring to Juicy Couture, a popular luxury loungewear brand.

Clarissa viewed college students around her who could afford real branded luxury goods as being of a higher socioeconomic status than she, and she assumed that their bags

were real, but that didn't cause her to approve their usage. In the context of the "BU girls," for Clarissa, they might as well have been fake. The fact that they were real, she assumed, made in an authorized factory and sold at an authorized store, had absolutely no impact on her assessment of their use. As with Trina and the Facebook group, that the item is real or not does not indicate proper usage. It is not about *what*—the object itself—but *who* and *how*. "Just because it's real," Clarissa says, "doesn't make it right."

But what does make it "right"? For Clarissa, it seemed to be about having "good personal style," and "knowing the trends and putting together cute outfits." For her, branded objects, real or fake, contained enough semiotic information to be desirable, to be, as she called them "the building blocks" of an outfit, but they had to be "just one piece of the puzzle." We were in her bedroom, going through her closet, and she put together a typical outfit for me, "thrift store heels, I think from the 90s or so, this Nanette Lepore dress from Beacon's Closet⁴, this Target denim jacket, and then this Channel rhinestone pin from Chinatown." She particularly prided herself on "mixing high and low," and on "knowing when to use what brands." She told me, "Those girls who just carry those gorgeous Balenciagas all day everyday? They don't even think about it at all. It's meaningless."

Similarly, Richardson found that for "authentic consumers" -- those who buy the "reals" -- luxury brands can preserve their status in the face of counterfeiting. These consumers feel that they can be "distinguished by their consumption practices and not just their brands," that is, their ability to consume "omnivorously" by "skillfully indulging in brands across many tiers of status," (need year + page numbers) in contrast to lower status

⁴ A small but high-end designer from a Brooklyn thrift and vintage shop.

consumers, who can't. For Richardson, it seems, Clarissa would not qualify as an omnivore because she does not actually buy real high-end items.

Elsewhere, in a related study on purse parties, Richardson (2009) finds that, in their conversion to authentic consumption, people who buy fakes can become omnivores, consuming across multiple tiers of brands. This argument relies on the assumption that authentic consumption of brand meaning requires that the object being consumed is officially branded. It implies material and economic rather than functional or semiotic omnivorism. It also imports from Peterson and Kern's (1996) original formulation of omnivorism the assumption that this mode of consumption is a marker of high status. However, I would argue instead that it is a mark of highly engaged, creative consumption, which can occur across social classes. Unauthorized branded fashion allows access to this kind of omnivorous consumption to those who may not, whether by choice or necessity, purchase officially branded objects.

Richardson argues that, in the socially networked consumption of counterfeit luxury brands that occurs at purse parties, distinction, democratization and omnivorism can occur simultaneously. She develops a three-phase model whereby attendees first demonstrate pre-party distinction, creating symbolic boundaries between themselves, "down-to-earth" consumers, and those who would be "frivolous" enough to spend money on a real luxury brand (2009:19). Next, she found that through consumption of the counterfeit during the purse party, consumers gained what Richardson calls "pseudo-access" to the brand. "Paradoxically," she writes "pseudo-access to the brand via the counterfeit allows the consumers to form a relationship with the authentic brand, democratizing the exclusive luxury product, and bringing it into these consumers' consideration sets" (2009:20).

Finally, Richardson argues that in order to resolve tension between liking the brand and desiring the objects and seeking to maintain a non-frivolous self-concept, they adjust their behavior. Though they “do not make themselves over by completely becoming luxury consumers[...], they skillfully traverse the status hierarchy by possessing both the luxury brand with which they have developed a relationship, and possessing other seemingly down-to-earth brands that are consistent with their social identities” (2009:30). Further, because, following Belk, (1998) these possessions have become “extension of the self,” the owning a fake creates dissonance because consumers are “constantly reminded publicly of the fact that they are perpetrating a façade” (Richardson, 2009:21). The “pseudo-access” they have gained to the brand is “predicated on a fake, so the symbolic barrier between themselves and the brand still exists” (21). By unadopting the counterfeit and purchasing a real, they “learn how to balance their luxury and their ‘down-to-earth’ tastes, so as not to harm their social identities,” thus becoming omnivores who “not only like a variety of items on the status hierarchy, they know the rules of relevance and employ them” (2009:24).

This argument relies on the assumption that legitimate consumption requires an authorized branded object. Peterson and Kern, who established the “omnivorism” language through empirical studies of musical taste, did not consider whether not their opera- *and* country music-loving high-status omnivores were paying for the songs they listened to, and it being 1992 when their studies were conducted, it seems unlikely that they ought to have. Nevertheless, it is also unlikely that their ability and desire to enjoy both the Dixie Chicks and Tosca would have been impacted by whether they paid 99 cents to iTunes when they downloaded it or not. Similarly, it is hard to imagine that Clarissa is anything but an omnivore. In fact, like Richardson’s “authentic consumers,” she wants to be characterized

by her “consumption practices” and her “skill,” which is exactly what she sees as distinguishing her from the “BU girls,” who may be perceived as “authentic consumers,” but are not as savvy nor as omnivorous. Although it might be accurate to say that Clarissa felt that her clothing and accessories were an “extension of herself,” unlike the respondents in Richardson’s work, she felt no dissonance, no sense that because her branded items were fake, she or her relationship with the brands were as well. As she said of her acrylic nail extensions, “whether I bought them or I grew them, they’re still *my* nails. They’re not anyone else’s. And they’re real. They’re certainly not imaginary.”

This keys into the second assumption underlying Richardson’s argument. Like Peterson and Kern, who developed the concept of “omnivorism” to describe the historical shift from “snob effect” -- where “high status” individuals tend to consume only “high brow” culture -- to a state in which this same segment of individuals began to consume across multiple levels of culture, Richardson’s argument implies that omnivorism is itself a marker of elite status. As with the members of “Darling I can tell by the rest of your outfit that your Louis Vuitton handbag is fake” and Trina and with Clarissa and the “BU girls,” items are deemed likely to be “real” or “fake” depending on how they are being deployed, but this judgment is not necessarily evaluative. Whether an item is officially branded is not a marker of high status, either as a creative consumer of fashion—as Clarissa sees herself—or as a person who “can afford” a Louis Vuitton handbag, as both Trina and the “BU girls” presumably are.

Although I would place these two caveats on the concept of omnivorism, I do think it is a useful term to describe the kind of active mode of ownership seen in a consumer of fakes such as Clarissa. I would add to this a third caveat: the omnivorism Richardson

describes is a “mode of consumption,” one embedded in the site of exchange. However, I would propose instead that omnivorism may better describe a mode of ownership or use. It shifts the site of creativity in fashion away from the designer, who produces a particular object, to the consumer, who by owning and using, creatively constructs the material and semiotic content of their lives. Most clearly, this kind of creativity is evident in consumers who assemble outfits, meaningfully sampling the content of each garment.

Forever Fakes: “Close Copies” and the Nature of Innovation In Fashion

“As you can probably tell, I love Forever 21,” Clarissa says. She’s showing me around her clothing collection—which, indicative of her omnivorism, includes a wide range of items, from Canal Street Prada, to high-end vintage and contemporary thrift store pieces, to boutique buys like Plenty by Tracey Reese and Loomstate, to yes, a lot of Forever 21. “Does that count as what you’re talking about?”

At that point in my project, I wasn’t really sure, so I ask her what she thinks, and she says that she really doesn’t know either. Forever 21, the loud, crowded (lots of clothes and lots of customers require lots of staff) retail outlet found in malls across America, sells (along with trendy items like polyester “clubbing tops” and low-priced staples like solid cotton t-shirts) spot-on knock-offs—what legal scholars Jeannie Suk and C. Scott Hemphill call “close copies” of each season’s looks, not only from big-name runway collections, but from lesser-known emerging designers (2009:35). Close copies are also, for Clarissa, an important part of the omnivore’s diet.

As Clarissa pointed out, close copies are not quite the same thing as fake branded goods, but they do seem to constitute a relevant and related phenomenon. Although fashion fan may look at item that either copies or evokes a brand and say, for example,

“That is dress is very Balenciaga,” unbranded garments may not trade on the transmedia meaning of the brand the way that objects with clear logos do, but by comprising outfits that give context and meaning to the branded objects, contribute to it. They can also reveal an important insight about the way fashion is used, that ownership of a fashion object, whether branded or unbranded, real or fake, is *active* in that innovation occurs when the consumer creates an outfit, not just when a designer creates a garment. “Everyone I know who’s into fashion—who knows how to mix high and low—shops at Forever 21,” Clarissa tells me. Unlike fellow fast-fashion retailers Zara and H&M, which come out with seasonal collections of their own based loosely on the runway trends, “[Forever 21] usually only has a couple at most things so when someone comes out of the dressing room returning something that you want, you jump to see if it’s your size,” she explains, “And then since they get new shipments everyday, half the time by the time you come out of the dressing room, everything is all moved around and there’s all new stuff out.”

“It’s kind of amazing how they do it,” Clarissa says, “it seems like they know even before the collections come out, and they get things in stores so much faster than, like, everyone else.” She seemed to imply some kind of conspiracy, or suspect byzantine corporate espionage, both of which possibilities only add to Forever 21’s allure. Indeed, manufacturers who explicitly copy pieces from each season’s collections are reported to hire “knock-off consultants,” who “pose as ordinary shoppers while scouting boutiques in London, Paris and Milan,” then “each month, mail 100 photos of the hottest designs to 55 American clients” (Agin, 2004). And Forever 21 is effective; according to *The New York Times*, it takes just six weeks for a close copy to reach stores, though it often seems like less (La Ferla, 2007).

Clarissa had “no doubt that the clothes are made in sweatshops,” but, she said, as I’ve heard over and over of fakes and copies and replicas of all varieties, “I don’t think buying the real, or buying like original designs from stores like Club Monaco or Gap”—two not-quite-fast-fashion retailers who are not known for close-copying—“would fix that.” Again and again, consumers of both close copies and other kinds of fakes expressed the same sentiment. “I would pay more if I knew that the working conditions were good, or if it were really high-quality, but it’s really not like even a \$300 Marc by Marc Jacobs dress is that much better. Actually, their zippers suck,” one said. To her, almost everything at the mall is fast fashion quality, no matter the price tag or store. “Anyone who thinks that paying more for something automatically means that it wasn’t made in a sweatshop is kidding themselves.” To many I spoke with, there seemed to be parity of quality and of assumed manufacturing conditions between a \$70 top from Arden B. and a \$15 one from Forever 21, and the one from Forever 21, particularly if it was a close copy of a runway look rather than a perhaps clumsily referential version, was likely to be more desirable. Clarissa took particular satisfaction in paying for what she got.

Forever 21 is a divisive presence in today’s fashion ecology. Not everyone is as supportive of close copies as Clarissa. In fact, this practice inspires opposition ranging from offense to outrage, both cultural and legal. Characterized as the “most notorious copyist” (Hemphill and Suk, 2009:126), Forever 21 is often called-out on the fashion blog Fashionista for garments seen as particularly egregious in a regular feature called “Adventures in Copyright.” In a recent and typical such post, Fashionista blogger Britt Aboutaleb wrote of a pair of shoes, “Each and every time we see these Chloe multi-strap wedges we wince a bit and wish we’d had the courage to spend our tax return money on

them instead of a new computer.” She then lists various jealousy-inspiring sightings and continues, “Not wanting to feel left out, Topshop’s made their own. They’ve ditched the two inch wedge, silver oval buckles and \$700 plus price tag in favor of a cone-shaped heel, gold rectangular buckles and a \$120 tag.” Rather than be glad that she won’t have to choose between a new computer and the strappy sandals, she instead continues, “Unfortunately the Chloe version’s already sold out everywhere (trust us, we’ve looked), but that doesn’t mean you need the Topshop shoe. They won’t fool a soul.”

A closer look at these posts and the comment threads in response to them provide a microcosm of the controversy surrounding fast fashion close copies. Like all “Adventures in Copyright” posts, this inspires ire—and more comments than most other posts—from readers, who, in general, seem to have an oppositional relationship with the Fashionista bloggers. “These posts make you guys sound like snobby label-whore fashion girls that need a slap in the face. please stop.” wrote one reader. Commented another:

Do the editors at fashionista actually read the comments that come with every adventures in copyright post? because there are some very valid points made about the inanity and unnecessary overbearing elitism of these posts, and it seems like the editors are willfully ignoring them.

A particularly contentious post was about a \$90 black mesh dress that clearly looked like a \$955 (on sale) Alexander Wang. “The thing is, no one has to buy the \$1000 version. Most people can’t,” Fashionista blogger Melissa Elliott wrote, “But instead of buying a copycat, why not admire the original and honor the designer’s work by not encouraging mass reproductions and rip-offs?” The following comment adequately sums up the ways in which Fashionista was perceived by its readership to “just not get it”:

Oh no! Why would you want to OWN and USE what you admire when you can merely covet it from afar? I mean, fashion isn’t about wearing clothes, it’s about constructing them, seeing them as art only and sealing them away or pulling

them out of the reach of every day people. THAT'S fashion right there. Moreover, why would we want EVERYDAY people seeing our bourgeois style? Why, there might be some shift in power and privilege. Clearly ONLY the rich should be able to have style -- the rest can be content in observing.

Another reader advised:

stop clicking on these posts. they post so many "adventure in copyright" posts because they know that everyone will want to click on it and leave a comment telling fashionista how stupid it is. it's the clickwhoring a la gawker strategy. vote with your mouse.

Some readers prefer to take Fashionista's callouts as tips. Wrote one, "for those of you who had trouble with the Topshop link, just search "voodoo mesh corded tunic top" and you get to the dress. i just bought one, but they only have sm sizes left. cute! thanks for tip fashionista."

Similarly controversial offline, Forever 21 has had over 50 copyright and trademark lawsuits brought against it (Lipke, 2009). Many of which, like the June 2009 case brought by design company Trovata over a series of sweaters sold at Forever 21 with buttons and trim very closely resembling sweaters Trovata produced during the same year, which resulted in a hung jury and mistrial, have been unresolved or unsuccessful. Trademark law offers protection against unauthorized use of brand logos, which covers unauthorized branded items, but the design itself is currently unprotected. Under current United States law, clothing is "useful articles" not protected by copyright, except to the extent that a garment's expressive content is "separable" from its function. Design patents may cover some items, but because they were not written with fashion in mind, their use is limited (Scafidi, 2006). Because there is little protection against this kind of close replication, the fashion industry has promoted the proposal of the Design Piracy Prohibition Act, which would lay out a set of criteria defining a limit right against design copying.

Attempting to take what Rosemary Coombe calls “a critical cultural legal studies” approach (citation), one that examines the social, political, and meaning-making implications of law, it is easy to unpack and find problems with the incentive thesis and the Design Piracy Prohibition Act or similar legislation. The main problem with such a law is that it would seek to protect a faulty notion of the nature of creativity and innovation in fashion, locating it in the authorized physical manifestation of a designer’s work. Instead, as I have argued, fashion at this time can best be understood as transmedia, allographic, the physical manifestation of which needs not be authorized in order to be meaningful. I would further argue, now, that in fact, an equally important site of innovation and creativity in this context⁵ of fashion is not the designer at all, but the consumer, who assembles an outfit.

The purpose, according to legal scholars Suk and Hemphill (2009), of the kind of protection the Design Piracy Prohibition Act would offer, is the incentive thesis, that is, that “without a robust enforcement of intellectual property rights against unauthorized imitation, producers of intangible goods would have few practical defenses against third party appropriation of the sale proceeds and, as a result, would rationally limit or cease investment in the development and production of new items” (Barnett, 2005:1382).

In an earlier influential article, Raustalia and Sprigman (2006) argue that rather than disincentivize innovation, close copying and design piracy paradoxically benefits fashion. Far from squelching innovation in the fashion industry, they argue, weak intellectual property laws encourage it. The very word “fashion” implies something transitory, but unlike technology and other industries built on obsolescence, there is no explicit reason—no faster processing speeds or denser memory storage—for clothes and

⁵ Other contexts of ownership and use, such as the collecting without incorporation into wardrobe, will be addressed in the conclusion to this thesis.

accessories to be to *need* to be new each season. Nevertheless, cultural conditions are such that it is very unlikely, no matter how lax regulation becomes, that fashion consumers will stop desiring new styles. Indeed, Raustalia and Sprigman (2006) argue, copying can actually speed up this process of obsolescence by increasing the speed at which a particular style disperses from the few that can afford a high end couture to total ubiquity. How quickly, that is, it can be played out.

Suk and Hemphill disagree with Raustalia and Sprigman, and use the Sneetches, creatures from the Dr. Seuss book, to characterize the logic of the piracy paradox thesis. The fictional Sneetches, swept up in fashion fad, all had stars affixed to their chests, until eventually, all Sneetches had stars, devaluing the investment. The star purveyor then offered star removal, and that became all the rage. When no Sneetches had stars, adding them back on became all the rage. With each cycle, the cunning remover and provider of stars made a profit and, eventually, the Sneetches went broke. Unlike Sneetches, Suk and Hemphill explain, fashion consumers do not fail to underestimate the longevity (or lack thereof) of a particular trend. "If copying increases, and hence the fashion lifespan of the item falls, a consumer will recognize that fact and lower her willingness to pay," they argue, and "Close copies make matters worse, reducing designer profits in the meantime by reducing sales" (2009:136). Thus, Suk and Hemphill do not disagree with the fundamental mechanics of the piracy paradox, but they disagree that it can have a beneficial effect on the fashion industry.

Suk and Hemphill make a clear distinction between what Lawrence Lessig (2009) calls "remix," and close copying, arguing for a relatively subtle approach that would not penalize designers for employing remix. Remix by the designer can allow for inspiration

from other designers, and, in turn, innovation. (2009:1228). Raustalia and Sprigman (2009) don't make a distinction between remix and close copying because both would serve the piracy paradox argument similarly.

One problem with Suk and Hemphill's distinction between close copying and remix is that it would be impossible to enforce intelligently. Suk and Hemphill argue for the need for fashion design protection, but propose a "substantial dissimilarity" test in order to preserve innovation through inspiration and allow designers to "jump on a trend once it has begun, adopting the trend feature but altering the details to satisfy particular demand for differentiation" (2009: 141). They freely admit that this test would produce "difficult line-drawing problems" and point to Yves Saint Laurent's suit against Ralph Lauren, which, brought under French copyright law, alleged infringement in the case of a black tuxedo dress (2009:142). Although the French court imposed liability over Lauren's version, which was made from a different fabric, had added pockets, wider lapels, and different color buttons, Suk and Hemphill claim that it would pass their test, though would be "a close one" (2009:142). A Forever 21 dress, however, made from different fabric with a different cut to the sleeves and a different drape to the skirt, in slightly but clearly different colors than a Jonathan Saunders look-alike, is supplied as an example of a copy that does not include sufficient "substantial dissimilarity."

Because innovation on the part of the alleged copyist is Suk and Hemphill's primary concern, an evaluation of the intent of the designer is necessary to determine the nature of similarity. When making subjective decisions in such spirit, it is easy to assume, perhaps correctly, that Ralph Lauren meant homage or reference by the duplicated YSL dress and that Forever 21 simply meant to closely copy the current season's trend as efficiently as

possible to sell to consumers who wanted the look but did not want to have to pay the prices a real Jonathan Saunders dress demands. Answering the question who gets to pay homage and who may only pirate seems a dubious duty for law.

How this question gets answered seems clear enough to many readers of Fashionista, certainly knowledgeable fans of high fashion, even if they don't share beliefs about intellectual property with its producers, who often point out that an item being touted as original in an Adventures in Copyright post was itself inspired by an older look. Further, whether the material producer of the item intended homage or profit is irrelevant once that garment goes into circulation in an omnivorous consumer's wardrobe.

"The proliferation of close copies of a design is not innovation—it serves flocking but not differentiation," Suk and Hemphill write (2009:107). That is, it allows everyone to, like a Sneetch, uniformly adorn their chest with a star with little-to-no variation even among star designs. This is only true if people wear one assemblage of garments, one complete outfit. In general, among fashion fans, wearing a "total look" is considered bad form. Novices, such as those featured on Bravo's What Not To Wear, are encouraged to look at mannequins for a failsafe look. Occasionally, a celebrity will be dressed in a total by a designer for a special occasion, such Madonna wearing a much-maligned Gucci ensemble that was said to resemble "shrubbery" to a recent UNICEF fundraiser, but because this tends to be seen as the creative expression of the designer, an extension of the runway, and reliant on the personal relationship between the celebrity and the designer, it has not become a common or aspired-to practice among most fashion aficionados and omnivorous consumers (Clements Simpson, 2009).

The commenters on Fashionista, as much as they seem to enjoy debating and baiting

the bloggers about the elitism of Adventures in Copyright, are even more interested in the talking fashion, particularly the way a look has been built using individual garments. On the blog's other most popular feature, Streetwalker, which features girl-on-the-street interviews with and photographs of people in outfits the bloggers find inspiring, commenters critique and laude this "personal style." Similarly, Clarissa, like many others who buy both fast fashion close copies and counterfeit branded luxury goods, spoke not of individual items having meaning on their own, but about how they fit into an outfit, an occasion, a season, a context.

Fashion, in this sense, can be understood as more dependent on what art critic Nelson Goodman calls "implementation" than "execution." Execution is what goes into making a work of art and implementation is what goes into "making it work" (1982:281). According to Goodman, each form of art may have different boundaries between execution and implementation. A novel is executed in manuscript form and implemented in printing, promotion, and distribution. With an etching, however, printing is part of the execution. Both processes are essential for aesthetic functioning. "On the one hand," Goodman writes, "execution of a *work* is required for its implementation; on the other hand, implementation is the process of bringing about the aesthetic functioning that provides the basis for the notion of a work of art" (1982:282).

Thus, innovation in fashion happens not at the level of the garment, produced by a designer, but at the level of the outfit, produced by the consumer. This is especially true of transmedia branded items, which locate their meaning not at the level of the individual physical garment but across a network of meaning sites, whose authenticity is determined in relation to dynamic context, both during exchange and use, but it is equally and perhaps

more clearly true of close copies.

Conclusion: Tactical Fashion

"Dressing is a way of life." – Yves Saint Laurent

Arjun Appadurai writes that "the diversion of commodities from specified paths is always a signal of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic," and notes, this diversion also "always carries a risky and morally ambiguous aura" (1986:26-7). He gives as examples of diversion: economic hardship that drives families to part with heirlooms, selling what would otherwise only be able to be exchanged through gift or inheritance, of war and the plunder that typically accompanies it, and theft. He also gives "subtler" examples of diversion, including that of "tourist art," the trade in which "objects produced for aesthetic, ceremonial, or sumptuary use in small, face-to-face communities are transformed culturally, economically, and socially by the tastes of markets and ideologies of larger economies" (1986:26). In some ways, the fakes represent a similar way in which commodities are diverted from their path, and this is true whether it concerns the actual material form, or the transmediated brand, or some combination thereof, whether we label that diversion theft, piracy, or appropriation.

Certainly, the fakes have a "morally ambiguous aura." Nowhere is this clearer than in the fashion industry's attempt to depict the trade in fakes as one with a deep social cost. *Harper's Bazaar's* anti-counterfeit fashion website, *Fakes are Never in Fashion* gives unsourced and

unspecific statistics, citing "\$20 million: Estimated loss to American companies from counterfeit products" and "750,000 United States jobs lost to intellectual property theft." It also encourages readers to be the "Fashion Police," linking to a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol tip site and encouraging them to "anonymously report a fake," presumably the host of a purse party. Elsewhere, it primarily takes the stance of consumer education, presuming that most consumers are ignorant of the "price" of fakes, providing them with vague but shocking anecdotes tying fakes (but not other kinds of mass produced clothing) to child labor, prostitution, and organized crime.. It also includes short quotes from readers, mostly conversion tales, such as "Kelly in Seattle, WA," who writes:

I just read your article about knock-off bags. I am horrified by it. I own several of these bags, and so does everyone I work with. We have had parties at our day spa where we sell fake handbags. We even have one scheduled for next month. I would love to get a downloadable copy of this article to share with my staff, clients and friends. We will be canceling the upcoming party and will not be allowing future ones. I may be able to make only a small difference, but I am committed to making whatever difference I can. Child labor is one of the worst crimes on this planet.

But other readers have a have a different reason for condemning fakes, such as Holly in Huntington NY, who writes, "I am a firm believer in that if you can't have the 'real' thing, then you should find something equally as fashionable at a price point that you can afford. I can honestly say that I completely agree with and support your campaign that 'fakes' are never in fashion." A blog post on the site that critiques a *Times of India* story about fakes that offered a "cavalier display of disregard" offered a sentiment poised halfway between Holly and Kelly's:

Certainly trend journalism should be exciting and revelatory, but to encourage an epidemic with so many unseen victims? To detail how to get those designer looks without the designer prices? Come on! We're all for smart shopping, but that's just appalling.

Here, as in the subtext of the whole site, taste and morality, both of which are seen as

threatened by fakes, are inextricably entangled. Sumptuary offense hides behind moral offense.

That is not to say that consumption of fakes is without ethical reasoning. For example, among those who buy fakes, there is a clear distinction between buying a known counterfeit and being duped by inauthentic goods. As mentioned earlier, members of *The Fashion Spot's* fake handbag forum are often offer their extensive knowledge of high-end fakes to member of *The Purse Forum*, helping them to avoid unwittingly buying a fake. Similarly, a manager at a non-chain resale shop similar to Buffalo Exchange, herself a purchasers of fakes, told me that her store have a policy against purchasing and reselling fakes. Even if they are really nice, she explained to me once, if there is any doubt at all, they don't take them. To her, fakes must be valued at the moment of trade *as fakes*. There must be no ambiguity.

Her shop already sells real luxury branded items at dramatically reduced costs. The manager tells me she's turned down items she's pretty sure were real, but might have been good really good fakes--items she would have gladly purchased herself and that she could have sold at a lucrative price-- just in case. Following Appadurai's example of families forced by economic duress to sell heirlooms, these reals can be considered "diverted" as well. At the Buy Counter, the seller/customer expects to be given a fair price for the things they are parting with. They must trust that the price will not be increased after they leave the store. Similarly, they must also anticipate that they are making a fair purchase. As a broker diverted commodities, the resale shop must be able to credibly and without confusion make claims about the nature of the objects it sells, and fakes are just too tough a call.

I ask the manager if she thinks my Chanel was real and she tells me that it must be. She, too, had never seen a vintage fake like that, and plus the seller, as I described her, didn't seem like someone who'd have a fake. "Honestly," she told me, "you don't get a lot of people trying to sell us their reps. I think when people are willing to sell expensive or sentimental things, they're doing it because they need money," she said, "I don't think people assume that fakes are worth anything, even if you paid a lot of money for them. I guess it's true, because we don't buy them." The resale shop never takes anything that's not in good condition, and bad fakes are usually not in good enough shape after they've been used long enough for someone to get sick of them. Plus, people rarely sell their non-vintage vacation t-shirts which, separated from the vacation, are just t-shirts. High-end replicas require specialized knowledge to appreciate and distinguish them from reals. Perhaps the value of fakes is always too personal, and owners know that they can't be ethically priced for resale.

Perhaps this crisis, then, is not ethical or moral so much as creative, perhaps it is more about ownership and authorship, a crisis in who get the make the meaning, one in which shifted from the "productions" stage of the biography to the "ownerships," with exchange an important moment that renegotiates both. Appadurai's language of "diversion" is largely framed as a response to a social crisis, but the act of consuming luxury brand material and meaning outside approved and official channels can also be read as an assertion, one which may proactively push such a crisis forward rather than always respond to it. Thus framed, the consumption of fakes because more like what Michel de Certeau calls a "tactic," stealthy forms of resistance, creativity, and trickery on the part of the weak, the "secondary production hidden in the process of [the] utilization" of

commodity (1984:xiv). The purchase and use of fakes becomes an enunciation.

It is in this sense the mirror of Appadurai's example of diverted tourist art. Like colonial interlopers who develop a set of tastes and practices through which to purchase art estranged from the culture it is conceived to represent, consumers of fakes develop a set of tastes and practices through which to purchase branded luxury fashion outside the culture it is conceived to represent. As I have explored, those who purchase fakes may also purchase reals, or indeed may not be very different from those who do, but the metaphor still stands that those who may have been outsiders to from Thomas's "luxury" dream consume and make new meaning of a culture characterized by exclusion. That is not to say that assertions about luxury and sumptuary exclusivity are the only kind of, in de Certeau's term, "poached" meaning that can be made. The fact of laying claim to the language of luxury brands outside their authorized channels is one kind of poaching, the bricolent use that follows carries this everyday creativity forth.

The purchasing of fakes becomes an act of "anti-discipline." The consumption of fakes is poised somewhere between John Fiske's (1989) Certeauian description of shoplifting, which he characterizes as "not a guerilla raid just upon the store owners themselves, but upon the power-bloc in general; the store owners are merely metonyms for their allies in power—parents, teachers, security guards, the legal system, and all agents of social discipline or repression" (1989: 37) and his notion of window-shopping, in which "the place of shopping malls is turned into numberless spaces temporarily controlled by the weak" (1989: 38), a space of commerce used for myriad social uses outside of actual purchasing.

Although the *Ownerships* chapter focused mostly on the assemblage of an outfit as

such an act of innovation, this does exclude those who-- like some of the message board connoisseurs who treat their reps as collectables, curated for stewardship rather than everyday use, or like some of the street market tourists, who exhaust the purpose of the fake at the conclusion of their trip to Chinatown--may never put their counterfeit branded object into circulation. Clothes may become places we inhabit, bags may become niches for our things, but even if we don't use them, fakes become part of the personal bricolent microgeographies of our everyday life. As Fiske writes, "every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the production of meaning" (1989: 35).

McCracken points out the capacity of "the fashion system to engage not just in the invention of cultural meanings but in its radical reform" (1998:80). He asserts that these "meaning-suppliers," that is, "groups responsible for this radical reform of meaning are usually those that exist at the margin of society: hippies, punks, or gays" because they "represent a departure from culturally constituted conventions" (1998:81). This is certainly true for one woman I talked to, a self-identified "old punk," who wear stacks and stacks—sometimes as many as ten-- silver chain bracelets with a little charm, in either a heart or a circle, that says "Please Return to Tiffany's"—on her tattooed arm. Some are real, she tells me, and some are fake. For the most part, she's forgotten which. As an employee at Buffalo Exchange, actually, has regular access to discounted resale reals and whenever one comes in, or whenever she's in New York and can get a good deal on a fake, she picks one up. "It makes sorority girls pretty offended," she says, "Like I shouldn't get to have all these, like they're not supposed to be worn like this. It freaks out the locals." She rolls her eyes and laughs, as if it's awkward and almost inappropriate to make these kind of statements, to read the text of her fashion choices so explicitly.

However, the case of counterfeit branded fashion is particularly interesting because it relies on and expands the potential of those outside “the margins of society” to act as these “meaning suppliers.” When I told Clarissa about the recent uproar over rapper Rick Ross sporting a pair of fake Louis Vuitton sunglasses on the cover of *XXL Magazine*, she enjoyed it, but she also pointed out that, from her perspective, just by wearing fakes, Rick Ross, an African American man and a rapper, and a celebrity was automatically assumed to be making “more of a statement” whereas she, if caught wearing fakes, would likely be just assumed to be “a poser.” Whether or not this matches up with the actual response to Ross’s fake sunglasses (he was, in fact, accused of being a poser, if not in so many words, by more than a few observers), Clarissa’s implicit point is still relevant—just because she is less clearly “other” to the world of luxury as it is constructed, it does not necessarily follow that her use of fakes is any less a radical trick, tactic, ruse. Indeed, those occupying a space outside what de Certeau calls “groups associated with the ‘counter culture’ --groups that were already singled out, often privileged, and already partly absorbed into folklore” (1984:xii) might even offer the most radical use of fakes because they are more invisible, shapeshifting, trickersterish.

I am reminded of a regular feature on *Imaginary Socialite*, a personal blog by former *Fashionista* writer Faran Krentcil, called “Real or Fake.” In it, Faran takes presumably surreptitious cell phone camera shots of questionable branded fashion, then asks her readership to debate the authenticity of the objects. Fake-spotting is an urban safari: she shoots possible fakes in grocery stores, across subway platforms, in line for the ladies’ room. Never, it seems, does she feature fakes that flaunt themselves as such, never over-the-top usage by over-the-top people. She’s always on the hunt for the almost-but-

not-quite, the ambiguous, the maybe. Perhaps, for Faran, fakes are fascinating and destabilizing, even threatening, because they offer a secret kind of rebellion, one that is, as de Certeau puts it, “is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly” (xiii). Does she or doesn’t she? Is it or isn’t it? By the time you get your cell phone camera out, she’s on the train, turned the corner, long gone.

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